LUCRETIA LOMBARD

KATHLEEN NORRIS

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LUCRETIA LOMBARD

Books by Kathleen Norris

HARRIET AND THE PIPER
JOSSELYN'S WIFE
LUCRETIA LOMBARD
MARTIE, THE UNCONQUERED
MOTHER
POOR, DEAR MARGARET KIRBY
SATURDAY'S CHILD
SISTERS
THE BELOVED WOMAN
THE HEART OF RACHAEL
THE RICH MRS. BURGOYNE
THE STORY OF JULIA PAGE
THE TREASURE
UNDERTOW

"In the eery candle-light her strange eyes blazed like topazes . . ."

LUCRETIA LOMBARD

BY

KATHLEEN NORRIS

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY
A. I. KELLER

GARDEN CITY, N. Y., AND TORONTO
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First Edition

TO

MARY-GENEVIEVE AND EDMUND MARKS

In the full cup of your felicity;
Who have of life and love so rich a store,
Let this small gift from one who loves you be
One little drop the more.

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LUCRETIA LOMBARD

CHAPTER I

In the long drawing-room of the stately home of Judge Samuel Curran and Bessy Emerson Curran, his wife, there reigned an utter, almost an uncanny silence. Yet there were six persons seated there, any one of whom, under ordinary circumstances, might have been considered equal to the demands of a more or less brilliant conversation.

The room was large, softly and beautifully lighted, delightfully warm on this cold winter night. A fire of great logs had fallen to pink embers in the big fireplace; dim lamps here and there picked out a detail of the handsome rugs, the orderly ranged backs of leather books, the great piano holding an immense brass jar of chrysanthemums, the subdued richness of hangings and walls. Wide spaces were broken by polished mahogany surfaces bearing potted ferns; above the mantel were the large oil portraits of the handsome old white-haired Judge, and his plump, comfortable, be-jewelled wife.

Outside in the darkness, a rain-storm was howling over Sanbridge, a prosperous little city placed somewhere between Boston and New York, and drawing its intellectual ideals from the one as surely as it drew its fashions and amusements from the other. But

inside was the luxury, the beauty, and peace that the jurist and his wife had known for all their thirty-odd years together. In the big, spacious, and spotless pantry, young Emma and Bobby, the chauffeur, were gossiping as they prepared the usual half-past-ten o'clock tray of coffee and sandwiches. Upstairs, turning down the beds in the big, warm, orderly bedrooms, Nancy and Lizzie were deep in talk. But in the drawing-room there was silence.

Presently it was broken by a girl's voice.

"Don't push it, Fred!"

"I'm not pushing," a young man's breezy, ready tones answered cheerfully, almost as if he were pleased to speak. "I give you my word as a gentleman of the old school that——"

"Oh, hush, Fred!" an older voice, chiding and maternal, said impatiently. And again stillness spread itself over the long room, and the slishing attack of gusts of wind and rain against the windows and the comfortable crackling of a fallen ember of wood, made themselves pleasantly heard.

"It's moving," said an extraordinarily rich and poignant voice, suddenly. The words lingered on the air like the notes of a bell. And after an interval several voices said together, "S-s-sh-sh!"

Of the six persons seated about the round bare table—that was empty except for the little heart-shaped planchette board in the centre, and the three or four hands that were laid upon the planchette—two were the kindly originals of the portraits over the mantel. Judge Samuel Curran was well past sixty, his wife a few years younger. Both were inclined to grow heavy, but while the Judge wore his

extra weight becomingly, seeming to increase in smile and twinkle as he increased in girth, his wife, like all the women of her type and generation, had been pummelled, corseted, massaged into shapeliness; her pretty middle-aged face showed the hours of care it cost her, her gray hair was elaborately and carefully dressed. All the girls of Sanbridge loved "Aunt Bessy," and told her that she was prettier than any one of them, and she believed them, and starved and struggled on courageously, never enjoying a meal, and rarely free from actual hunger between meals.

Next to her to-night, with her dark gipsy face glowing with excitement and absorption, was the dearest thing in the life of these elderly persons, their ward, the daughter of the closest friends they had ever had, the legacy that had supplied them with responsibility and delight for almost twenty years. This was Mary Yolande Warren, nicknamed "Mimi" in the days of her endearing and orphaned babyhood, and Mimi still to those who loved her.

She was not quite pretty, but there was every evidence of charm, good sense, and humor in the young face: she was astonishingly vivacious, and brimming with healthy mischief and energy. Her eyes were black, under a silky cloud of black hair, her cheeks crimson, her mouth, her joyous laugh, never long silent. Her gown was one of the odd oriental robes she often wore in the house; there were big pearls in her ears and these, and a bizarre chain of Chinese beads hanging about her slender throat, gave her to-night, at this occult enterprise, the air of a youthful seer.

Mimi was an unmitigated satisfaction to her guardians, just naughty enough as a child, just unconven-

tional enough as a young woman, to add spice to everything with which she came in contact. She was adored still by the girl friends who had shared school and college days with her; she was just good enough at golf and tennis and riding and boating and dancing to be always distinguished without ever being conspicuous. Her wealth, the Warren money, and the Warren interests, had not spoiled Mimi. Upon reaching the age of twenty-one more than a year ago, she had most sensibly and charmingly pleaded to be allowed to remain with the Currans; and here she was, the adored daughter of the house, with the two nephews who were more like sons here, to serve her in the place of big brothers.

Next to Mimi sat the younger of these nephews, Fred Winship, handsome, largely built, fair-skinned and fair-haired, and just now with his customary look of amusement and interest slightly touched with incredulity and something a little like ashamed self-consciousness. Fred had always been affectionate, always endearing and delightful and droll, but he had been as much a care as Mimi had been a delight, and traced about the handsome mouth were faint signs of looseness and weakness, and etched about the confident eyes were microscopic lines. There was something not quite hard, not quite sneering, lying like a cloud across his beauty even now, when the nearness of Mimi Warren was, as always, bringing out in him what was finest and best.

The fifth person at the table was Mrs. Curran's girlhood friend and life-long neighbor, Mrs. Cyrus Porter, who, with Mrs. Curran, was the dictator in social and philanthropic matters in Sanbridge, some-

thing vain, something of a snob in manner, but underneath the surface only a simple, good-hearted, small-town woman, interested alike in friends and foes, and anxious only not to get thin to the worrying point, and go into a decline like poor Ma and Mabel.

Last in the circle, and with one of her beautiful bare hands laid upon the toy, was a woman who was almost a stranger to this group and to the city, whose introduction into their midst to-night was the result of a little social mischance, but whose frank and simple interest in what they were doing had already gained the graces of them all.

Sanbridge, like all similarly situated cities, frequently drew strange residents from the greater cities, and to Sanbridge, it had become gradually known, during the past few months, had moved, from England, via the Argentine and New York, a certain Allen Lombard—rumor even hinted a "Sir" before his name—and his wife. Doctor Gedney knew them, was actually treating the man, who was an invalid. A quiet, soberly clad "Mrs. Lombard" had appeared at the Red Cross rooms during the last months of the War, and Mrs. Porter, and Mrs. Curran, and sometimes on Thursday afternoons, when the young girls of the nicest set came to sew, Mimi, had talked to her there.

To-night, by appointment, Mrs. Lombard had called to discuss committee work with Mrs. Porter, as president of the Red Cross. And, the storm keeping everyone else away, Mrs. Porter had suggested their going in next door, to see Mrs. Curran, who was one of the vice-presidents. And finally coming in to this warm, delightful drawing-room, they had found

Mimi, and the Currans, and Fred, seated about a small round table, and between amusement and incredulity and scorn over their first experiment with the occult.

Everyone had gotten up, the visitor had been introduced to the old Judge; all the others knew her, even Fred, who surprised them with the pleasure and friendliness of his greeting. He had been at her house, had played cribbage with her husband, it appeared, and she had a cordial, almost affectionate smile for the handsome big eager boy.

After a moment or two of laughing awkwardness over their occupation, the experiment with planchette was resumed. Mrs. Lombard admitted an interest in it, but, like themselves, she was half-amused and half-ashamed in saying so.

Another log was thrown on the fire, lights were again dimmed and the circle formed about the table. The matter had assumed a new dignity with the entrance of this unknown and interesting Mrs. Lombard.

She was a tall, beautifully made woman, whose face and voice and manner instantly proclaimed the gentlewoman. She laid aside her umbrella, and her plain, old-fashioned cloak, and quite simply took her place among them, about the table. The close feathered hat that came down almost to her eyebrows kept them from seeing her face fairly, but it was a charming, even a lovely face; skin, eyes, and a glimpse of hair, all a warm, clear brown, cheeks almost colorless, and the fine wide mouth that showed her dazzling teeth supplying a note of crimson. Above her wedding ring, as the older women instantly noted, a magnificent diamond shone. She put only her right hand

on the board, and as the séance proceeded, had little to say. She knew nothing of spirit writing, she had confessed, had never seen it tried before.

It was Mrs. Lombard who had said that the board was moving, and almost immediately she removed her hand, an odd look in her eyes.

"Now, you *were* pushing it . . ." she said to Fred Winship. He laughed, delightedly.

"I give you my word I wasn't!"

"Take your hands *off*, Fred," Mimi commanded, breathing hard, her eyes almost frightened.

Fred obediently removed his hands, his aunt immediately doing the same with her own soft fat fingers.

"It's—creepy!" she whispered.

"It's moving!" said Mrs. Lombard's extraordinary voice again.

The pencil was making rapid twirls and circles; Mimi's slender figure and gipsy head swaying with its quick motion. All the others, except Mrs. Lombard, were merely absorbed watchers now.

"Well, that's extraordinary!" said the Judge. "It's actually trying to write. Does it say anything? Read it, Mimi!"

"It's repeating and repeating!" Mimi said. She pushed the board aside, and looked at the pencilled sheet. "'No end and no beginning—no end——' It's unmistakable!"

"And see, up here, '. . . and no beginning!'" finished Mrs. Curran, eagerly.

"And here's the same thing again," Mrs. Porter said.

Mimi, awed and enthralled, looked boldly into space.

"Who are you?" she said, clearly and unashamedly. "No end and no beginning to *what?*"

"Say, you've got to ask one thing at a time, Mimi," Fred warned her. "These spooks——"

"Oh, shut up, Fred!" Mimi said, wearily. "Who are you?—Oh, look, it's jerking my arm off!" she gasped.

There were more rapid scrolls, they saw the word "gr—grn—grd—grace—grace—grace——"

"*Grace!*" said all the women, exchanging questioning glances.

"Grace who?" puzzled Mrs. Porter. "We had a cook named Grace, but she was colored. Still——"

"There's Grace Leonard—but she isn't dead!" Mrs. Curran pondered. "Grace—wasn't that little Middleton girl that you used to go to dancing-school with named Grace, Mimi? That family that moved to Minneapolis?"

"But she's not dead, Aunt Bessy!"

"Why, she might be, dear. You haven't seen or heard anything of her for years——"

"I don't know any Grace," Mrs. Lombard said, thoughtfully. "We might ask for the last name."

"She's been an actress, with that voice!" Mrs. Curran thought.

It was agreed to ask planchette for the second name. There was a flurry of scrolling; Mrs. Lombard took her hand from the board.

"I think you are the really occult one, Miss Warren," she explained.

"Right. Mary understands," planchette immediately confirmed.

"Mary?" questioned Mrs. Lombard, glancing up.

"My name is Mary!" Mimi explained, in a quick aside. "It's writing something——!"

"April second," the pencil scrolled quickly and evenly. "Now that is what is so dark—you must not—terrible——"

"I declare, I don't like it!" said Mrs. Curran, a little pale.

"It's just foolishness, Aunt Bessy," Fred said, lighting a cigarette. "It's Mimi's subliminal consciousness—that's all."

"Who *are* you?" Mimi demanded again. The pencil jerked so rapidly that the pretty sunburned hands were twisted to and fro wildly. "I can't tell what it's writing!" she whispered, half-laughing.

"Bohn—Bohn—Bohn," planchette wrote. "It is in Bohn."

"What is your name?" insisted Mrs. Lombard's bell-like voice.

"Grace Field," was rapidly written. This was scratched out. "Della Field, Grace and Della—this is not Della," scribbled planchette. "Grace Grace Grace."

"Are you somebody named Grace who wants to talk to us?" Mimi asked. "I know the pencil is going to write 'yes'!" she added in distress, as it made a graceful sweep and began the first letter of the word. "Oh, I *hope* I'm not cheating!"

"Money got by cheating don't do nobody no good, little girl," Fred interpolated, morally.

"Does any one here know you, Grace?" Mrs. Porter said, with a little nervous titter.

"No. Nobody—nobody," wote the pencil promptly. Mrs. Curran sat back, a little discouraged.

"When there are—so many—there, whom we know!" she offered dubiously.

"In the arbor," resumed the pencil. "In the arbor—but George had to go back!"

This was repeated several times, and Mimi looked about the group doubtfully.

"I'm afraid it's writing rubbish," she admitted. "Just what's in my head!"

"I wouldn't say that that was in your head, dear," Fred said, kindly. "You are young! Read good books, cultivate intelligent friends——"

"Oh, shut up!" Mimi whispered, entirely without animosity, and without removing her eyes from the board.

"It was my fault," wrote planchette. "It will be all happiness! But you must not—Steve must not —tell Steve he must not——"

"*Steve!*" gasped several voices. "Does it say 'Steve'?"

"Stephen is my other nephew," Mrs. Curran said to Mrs. Lombard.

The agitated scrolls and twists died away into mere scalloping and looping, sometimes facing one way, sometimes another.

"Steve must not . . ." began the pencil once more.

"Must not what?" demanded Mimi.

"This generation must not ask for a sign," suggested the Judge.

"I know, Sam! That's exactly what I feel!" his wife added, nervously.

"There is fire," wrote planchette. "But after the fire you will be happy."

"Who will?" the girl asked.

"Burchisons. Go by Burchisons," the pencil scribbled, rapidly. "You must go by Burchisons!"

"There *is* an old road, somewhere up near Red Pine," Mimi exclaimed, struck. "I've heard the name 'Burchisons Road'! Isn't that funny?"

"You may have remembered it without meaning to, Mimi," said Mrs. Porter.

"Happiness for everyone, no more trouble!" wrote planchette.

"Happiness for whom?" demanded Fred.

"For——" the pencil began. "It's going to write 'for Mimi'," Mimi herself said, smiling. "Well, I'm going to be happy, anyway!"

"Let me run it five seconds, and I'll bet you I'm going to be happy, too," Fred offered.

Mimi, ignoring him, asked the old question:

"Who is this, writing?"

"Grace," was instantly written. "Grace F—Field. April second."

"Grace Field!" Mrs. Curran exclaimed. "That name sounds familiar! Don't we know any Grace Field—no, we don't!" she finished, subsiding, after some thought.

"And have you a message, Grace?" Mimi asked, patiently.

"Be friends. But L. must go back," was written with feverish swiftness, in a gradually diminishing script. "It's too bad—it's too bad—it is too bad——"

When this had been repeated a score of times, Mimi paused.

"Is this Grace?"

"Yes. This is not Della. Della—this is hard. This is very hard. Della and Grace. April second. April second."

"What do you want?"

"To give back—to have him understand—to give him—bohn—bohn—bohn——"

"It *is* the colored cook!" Fred said, pleased. "Sure's you're bohn!"

"Oh, Fred, you ruin everything with your idiocies!" Mimi broke out, angrily, pushing the planchette away, and rising, excited and nervous, from the table. "Nobody can do anything while you're about! And I think we were just going to *get* something, Aunt Bessy!"

The Judge had touched a switch, pleasant light flooded the room. Lizzie, who had her own religious convictions, and considered this sort of thing as sinful and dangerous, came in with the heavy silver tray.

"Yes, we'll have some coffee!" Mrs. Curran said, relievedly. "Put that thing away, Mimi. It makes me nervous, and I don't like it!"

"No, but you do think there's something queer about it!" the girl said eagerly.

"Well, there is—when it jerks about under your fingers that way!" the elderly woman conceded.

Mrs. Lombard sat thoughtful in her big chair.

"L. might be me," she said, smiling. "My name begins with L. But isn't it supposed to be someone who is dead? Sir Allen has a daughter Louise, but she isn't dead. She's living in England with her husband!"

The women all heard it, although nobody gave a sign of doing so. It *was* Sir Allen then!

"We had a garbage man named Leonardo," Fred supplied, brightly. "He and his wife and two children died from ptomaine poison after a family wedding. It was in the paper.—Oh, say, aren't you going to have

some coffee?" he interrupted, anxiously, as Mrs. Lombard rose. Her wistful eyes lingered on the fireside chairs, but she shook her head.

"Mr. Lombard will be anxious about me," she said, deliberately correcting the former slip. "He is not well, you know——"

"But just a cup of coffee?" pleaded Mrs. Curran, everything else forgotten in hospitable solicitude.

"I'm sorry. But truly—it's after ten now. And we keep very early hours. The rain seems to have stopped."

"I'll send you, of course," said the Judge. "Lizzie, will you ask Bobby——"

"Thank you," said Mrs. Lombard, without protest. "Will you come and play cribbage with Mr. Lombard one of these evenings, Fred?" she said, buttoning her coat; "and will you bring your occult little cousin to have tea with me some time?"

"Once and for all, she's not my cousin!" said Fred, with his wild laugh.

"Indeed, I'd love to come to tea," Mimi said, still holding the visitor's hand, "and let's set the day now. Thursday?"

"Thursday." Mrs. Lombard was pleased. "Fred knows where my funny little house is."

"In Kingsgreen Square, Aunt Bessy," Fred said. "Right opposite the old Curran home! There's a second-hand book-store in the house now."

"Kingsgreen Square—shucks, you don't say so," beamed the Judge. "Bessy and I were children down there! I haven't been in that part of town for years and years!"

"You have to cross a horrid region to get there, but

it is quiet, and near the library," Mrs. Lombard explained. "We are in the old rectory of the church, there——"

"Saint Thomas', where we were married!" Mrs. Curran supplied. "Think of that, Ella," she said to Mrs. Porter. "I am coming down there some day to see you," she added, with something less than cordiality and certainty in her voice.

"Do," Mrs. Lombard answered, with just enough civility.

"You know I was going to take my brother down there, to talk Buenos Aires with Mr. Lombard," Fred said. "If I can, I'll get hold of him on Thursday, hey, Mimi?"

"We can try," conceded Mimi, wondering how much her face showed what her heart experienced whenever Stephen was mentioned.

"My nephew Stephen, Fred's older brother, is our district attorney," the Judge said, with a paternal pride. He rocked Mimi with an embracing arm, as she stood leaning against him. "He and I shared the responsibility of this young lady after her father's death," he said fondly.

"That must have been a dreadful strain! But I knew Fred was very proud of his brilliant brother," Mrs. Lombard said pleasantly and easily, smiling her farewells. "No, Fred—please don't bother!" they heard her say in the hallway. But Fred caught his hat and coat, and went out with her into the darkness.

"Now, I don't know whether you're cross with me for bringing her here or not, Bessy!" said Mrs. Porter, settling comfortably down before the fire for a gossip, when they went back into the sitting-room. "It

seemed the only thing to do. And we've not done one thing about the committee!"

"I think she is perfectly lovely!" said Mimi, on the arm of the Judge's chair.

"Charming, charming woman!" said the Judge, going happily to sleep.

"I think—yes, she's very nice," Mrs. Curran said. "I believe—would you, Ella? I *think* I'll call. Will you drive over there some day with me, Ella?"

"Did she say *Sir* Allen?' Mrs. Porter asked in a low voice.

They exchanged serious glances.

"She most certainly *did*," said Mimi.

"But Fred's friends are often so—so queer!" hesitated his aunt. "Titled people?—you really don't know a thing about 'em! And Kingsgreen Square——"

"Loveliest part of the city," droned the Judge, from under his silk handkerchief.

"Yes, it is really—just that block or two, although the neighborhood is awful. I'll tell you, Mimi, you can judge a lot better when you've been there to tea!" Mrs. Curran said in relief. "There's Fred coming back," she added, hearing steps in the hall, "he can tell us about them!"

But it was her older nephew who came in, cold, storm-blown, and breathless, to the fire. The women rearranged themselves with a welcoming exclamation of "Stephen!" and Mimi, in whose face all the roses of June had suddenly bloomed, brought a cup of coffee to his chair.

"Here, don't you wait on me, Mimi!" Stephen Winship said, with his own inimitable smile of affection and content brightening his face.

"Oh, Steve, you've missed such fun!" the girl said, eagerly. "What do you think we were doing—planchette! And Fred's friend, Mrs. Allen Lombard, was here—and she's lovely—and, Steve, I'm occult—really I am! The pencil simply jerked and flew for me, didn't it, Aunt Bessy?"

Stephen watched her, smiling indulgently. It was good to get back from an ugly and lonely death-bed where testimony had been recorded from dying lips, through wild and bitter weather, to this comfortable fireside, this welcome, this pretty fragrant girl with her dark and dancing eyes.

He was thirty; shorter than his brother, and not so handsome—not handsome at all by any ordinary standard. But there radiated from his fine gray eyes, and from his firm, well-set mouth, and from his ready, intelligent smile, something so warming, so winning, and so universally friendly, that it must be a hard heart that could pause to analyze his appeal. Stephen in his office, in his club, and among his friends was without a rival. His name was the first upon every list, whether it was for a dance, a municipal committee, an art contest, or a big charity concert. Dozens of girls had loved other men, and married other men, without ever dislodging Stephen Winship from a little special niche upon their altars, or ever feeling that Christmas was quite Christmas without a word from him. Dozens of young club men made other men their chums, without forgetting that whatever Steve Winship said and did was the supremely admirable and desirable thing. He worked hard, and went little into society; the one real passion of his life, as all the world knew, was his brother Fred.

But he was welcome everywhere, and it was tacitly conceded that the woman he married would be the acknowledged leader of the Sanbridge socially elect.

And everything pointed to Mimi Warren as that woman. His uncle and aunt had hoped for it for twenty years, and Mimi had adored him with all the fervor of her earnest young heart almost since babyhood. Fred flirted with her; she played with Fred. But to Stephen she had long ago given all her soul had to give of utter devotion. In return she had only the shadowy consolation that at least he liked no other woman better than herself, and that she had no more loyal friend and champion in the world. With Judge Curran, he had been joint guardian of her person and her property until her twenty-first birthday. He had always been devoted to her in a big-brotherly way.

And just lately—just during the past week or two—all life had become roseate and miraculous for Mimi with the hope that he cared differently—that he was beginning to care, as she did. Surely—surely he was developing a new fashion of being at home for dinner, surely he was taking more interest in his little grown-up ward's music, friends, employments, and amusements than he had formerly. Mimi's spirit, as it were, held its breath, waiting, watching, wondering.

"And did Mrs. Lombard introduce the planchette?" Stephen said to-night, over his steaming cup. "Is she—that sort?"

"Gracious, no!" Mimi protested. "She said she never had tried it before!"

"Steve, do you think there's anything in it?" his aunt asked eagerly. "I don't believe it—not all of it—but how do you explain it? *Can* you explain it?"

"It's all nonsense," Mrs. Porter added uncertainly. "Some of it is, anyway. But sometimes they do get remarkable things! It actually spelt out your name, Steve."

Stephen smiled in weary, contented indifference, looked comfortably about the big beautiful room, stirred his cup, and gave Mimi one of his indulgent, affectionate glances that never failed to stir her.

"No, but, Steve, what do you think of it?" she urged him.

"Why, I don't know a thing about it, or Mrs. Lombard," he answered. "Fred makes queer friends sometimes——"

"But, Steve, we want you to go to tea with us at her house on Thursday," Mimi told him. "They've been in the Argentine, you know, and her husband knows all about it. And Fred told him you were interested in Buenos Aires—you will go, won't you, Steve?"

Stephen smiled at her in silence.

"I'll do anything you want me to do," he conceded, presently.

Mrs. Porter had gone when Fred came in, but the others questioned him; he answered them enthusiastically. Wasn't she a peach? Sure, he knew the Lombards, had known them almost since they had moved to Sanbridge.

"Doctor Gedney knows them," said Fred, "met them on the steamer coming up from Barbadoes. He took me there to call one evening. The old boy—he's an awful crab, plays cribbage and that sort of thing;—paralytic or something. He's Scotch—Sir Allen——"

"Really, Fred! And she's *Lady* Lombard?" Mimi exclaimed.

"Sure she is. But they don't use it. It's one of those Scotch titles; he isn't in the Peerage, you know. She told me they had dropped it, travelling. But they're fine people, honest they are, Steve. The English consul down in New York runs up to see them; —spent last Saturday and Sunday there!"

"Mr. Davenport?" Mrs. Curran asked, eagerly. "Then I'm going! I'll go there next week!"

"Keyser was telephoning all over the place for you this afternoon, Fred," his brother said, after a pause, with a half-quizzical smile. Fred looked uncomfortable.

"He telephoned here twice!" his aunt added, in mild accusal. Mimi looked distressed.

"My Lord, that old boy certainly is a slave driver!" Fred observed, unimpressed. Keyser was the old confidential clerk in the law firm of Winship and Winship. Stephen said nothing further, he had dropped his elbows to his knees, and was looking thoughtfully into the replenished fire. "What happened," Fred added, a little uncomfortably, "was that Jerry Stover ran me out to the club, for lunch, and Hicks —that's the professional from the Singing Hill Club, was there, and he took a few of us over the course. My Lord, I never saw such golf! All Stover picked off me was forty bucks—that's all. That feller——"

"I met him—he was up there this morning, when we were riding," Mimi contributed, animatedly. "Isn't he ducky, Fred! Marjorie can imitate him—oh, I wish I could!"

Stephen glanced at his brother, glanced back at his own linked fingers, and was silent.

"Nothing doing at the office to-day, anyway, Steve!" Fred said, a trifle uneasily.

Mimi and Mrs. Curran looked unhappy; the Judge spoke unexpectedly from under his handkerchief.

"No way to run an office, Fred. Steve didn't take you into that firm to lose money!"

"Perhaps I'm not so damned anxious to stay in, if it comes to that!" Fred said, bitterly.

"You had a chance at medicine," Stephen said mildly. "And you had a year in Billings' office——"

"But, Steve, Mr. Billings himself said that architects are born and not made!" Mimi said, eagerly. "Don't —don't be cross at Fred for doing just what Marjorie and I and Ted Rutger are doing all day long!"

She had gotten to her feet, and now Stephen rose, too, and stood looking down at her earnest, concerned face.

"You're twenty-two, dear," he said, with unusual tenderness. "Fred's twenty-eight! You have a fortune, Mimi——" He smiled. "*If* I give it to you!" he warned her.

The group separated for the night; Fred and his brother went up to their big rooms on the third floor; the Judge and his wife lighted their old-fashioned, luxurious bedroom; lights were put out downstairs, silence and sleep held the Curran mansion.

But for another half hour—and another—a figure, wide-eyed and motionless, was curled in a moonlighted window in Mimi's room. And through the girl's whirling heart and brain the look Stephen had given her was fading and swelling, fading and swelling, as an undertone to the ecstasy of the rising, strengthening hope within her. The storm had died away, a strong wild wind was blowing.

Cold bright moonlight lay on the decorous garden, and on the tops of the plumy great trees, and on other gardens and trees, all down beautiful and prosperous Washington Street. The Porter garage, next door, was cut like a classic little house of stone in the sharp lights and shadows. Beside the rods of the iron fence its own clear shadow lay on the misty green of the grass.

This was Mimi's world, she had never known any other. She had always found it a safe and happy and loving world. But now it was something more.

"You're twenty-two, dear. You have a fortune, Mimi, if I give it to you!"

Nothing in the words, but there had been something new in Stephen's voice, even at that troubled and abstracted moment! Mimi remembered the smile, it was as if he had been glad to turn from Fred's inefficiencies to something real and true that she could give him.

She was twenty-two; she was alive and eager in every inch of the silk-clad form that was huddled here in the big woolly white wrapper. And her golden hour was close upon her.

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Lombard, after a good-night to Fred, had opened the side door of the old rectory of St. Thomas', in little Kingsgreen Square. The rain had stopped now, but ledges and roofs everywhere were still dripping in the gusty dark, a full moon was fighting behind streaming masses of cloud.

She went quickly up a short, broad flight of stairs; the rectory had not been designed for its present use, and its arrangement was unconventional.

The old church was closed now, and the basement of the rectory was stored with church furniture and hymn-books. The two upper floors had been rented, as a somewhat oddly conceived apartment, to the man who was sitting, pillowed in an invalid's chair, in the one large room of the six, and to the returning woman, his wife.

The room in which he sat was long and low, facing the southwest, and lighted, just now, by a dying coal fire and a green-shaded lamp. To the knowing eye it instantly announced itself an Englishman's room; there was that comfortable mixture of homeliness and richness, that independent, almost defiant use of the useful, the beautiful, and the wholly domestic that belongs to no other race.

The chairs were many and beautiful, deep leather chairs, mahogany chairs with broad cane seats and spindle arms, and one inviting old shabby chintz-

flounced basket-chair, with a tangle of knitting laid upon its broad arm-rest. The carpet was a fine old moquette, tacked from baseboard to baseboard in the old-fashioned way, and almost covered with splendid rugs; and at the three long, cloistral windows fringed rep curtains were looped back over fine transparent lengths of white net. There was a square piano in the room, and several variegated book-cases, of carved mahogany, of white-enamelled pine, and one, beside the invalid's chair, a revolving stand, of ugly yellow oak. There were tables, large and small, a student's green-shaded lamp, and a beautifully severe white, orange-shaded lamp of pottery; there were one or two large dim portraits in oil, framed etchings, and water-colors. On the mantel a large cracker-jar of cloisonné, and a traveller's clock in shabby green leather, stood between wonderful old candlesticks of gay-flowered china, on the tables and book-cases were odd plates and jars, two or three beautiful china tea-cups, and a caddy. Two canaries were silent in a brass cage over which a silk handkerchief had been thrown. Bowls full of flowers were everywhere, winter roses in glass, sturdy pink chrysanthemums tumbling in a china jar, wild huckle-berry spreading its polished small leaves over the Chinese mandarin coat on the piano, and even violets in the tiny silver vase that stood upon an old-fashioned high desk in an alcove that almost doubled the size of the room. And everywhere were the inevitable family photographs of the Englishman's sitting-room, wherever he may transplant it, dozens of them. There was a family group on the mantel, long-maned girls in their awkward teens and full-cheeked boys in tennis flannels, pictured on the steps

of some boat-house, a stout middle-aged father, and a lean, somewhat unsympathetic-faced mother beside them. On the book-cases were faded reminders of the last century: high-breasted young mothers with plainly coiled heavy hair and staring infants, foolish-looking young men with flowing ties and neatly cropped side-burns, small children on pony-back by ivied walls, and thin-faced, crimped women who subscribed themselves in dashing letters as "Aunt Flo" or "affectionately, Cousin Madge." A large framed photograph on the revolving book-case was of a florid, curly-headed, middle-aged man in hunting pinks, under whom was written "Yours—Hetherinleigh."

The room, despite this heterogeneous mixture, which crowded it, was specklessly clean and orderly, and possessed a quality not often found in American apartments, that of permanence. One felt, upon entering it, that life was established here, that these things were valued for more than their market values, and placed and treasured thus for years, would still be so placed and treasured when other years had gone. There was no sense of temporary botching, nor of the choice and taste of paid decorators or experienced collectors. This was home, and these dear familiar chairs and tables were what made home.

As unmistakably British as his apartment was the man who sat near the window, near the fireside and table, and close to the oak book-case. Months of experiment had shown this to be the desirable position for his chair, and a trying quarter of an hour every morning, for wife and maid, was that in which they attempted to wheel him to exactly the same place and

attitude. To get the heat of the coal fire that burned all day behind a fender of polished steel rods, to reach the table easily for his pipe or his book, to see from the window the trees and balconies and iron gratings of little Kingsgreen Square, without having the loathsome walls of the Fanning Mattress Factory affront his eyes, this—as he sometimes reiterated plaintively, —was all he asked. It did seem—it *did seem*—extraordinary that so much trouble had to be made about it.

He was a lean, grizzled man of perhaps fifty-two or three, with red veins upon his high cheek-bones giving an unhealthy and uneven floridity to his long, thin face. His gray hair was long and curly, his nervous deformed hands, emerging from the loose sleeves of his bed-coat, were long, too, knotted and colorless. He had sharp eyes, under bushes of wiry black brow that almost met above his aquiline nose, and his harsh mouth was half-hidden by a plunging curve of black moustache. About him were the evidences of his imprisonment: writing materials in an ornate old gift-case, a chessboard with a problem in progress, a covered pitcher of water and a tumbler, and hundreds of books.

With his wife, returning, came a rush of sweet, fresh air. She looked at him amiably, nodded to his surly glance, and disappeared, to reappear a few moments later with hat and coat gone, trim now in a dark gown of shabby black velvet, with plain white at her throat. A clock struck eleven, with sweet and silvery deliberation, another clock boomed in an adjoining room, the cuckoo clock beyond the piano, somewhere in dimness, chirruped mechanically. A coal broke in the fire.

Mrs. Lombard sank into the chintz chair without speaking, but with a dutifully keen glance that took in the details of the water pitcher, the fire, and the general condition of everything in the invalid's immediate neighborhood. Her hands, fine strong hands that seemed somehow older than her young face, busied themselves immediately with the knitting, although she did not look at it often, as the silver needles slipped out and in.

"Well," said Allen Lombard, suddenly breaking the silence, after two or three moments when his lowering, restless gaze had travelled furtively over her. "You decided to come back?"

"I decided to come back," she answered, evenly, giving him a fleeting look quite devoid of resentment.

He looked at the fire, bitter discontent in his face.

"How many of your precious committee got out in the storm?" he asked.

"Not one! But do you know, Allen, we had a really quite amusing time!" said his wife aloud. To herself she said, "He is tired, he is ill, this is the bad time for him!

"Mrs. Porter," she resumed, as he very studiously refrained from any mark of interest, "lives next door to Fred Winship's family, Judge—Judge—I am so bad at names!—Curran. I've seen old Mrs. Curran at the Red Cross rooms, and the girl—she's a dear sweet girl, Miss Warren. She seems to be a sort of ward of theirs. I imagine your friend Fred is in love with her."

"You mean you guess so," suggested his lordship.

"Did I say guess?" his wife asked, with a quick flush.

"Not this particular time, perhaps!"

"Oh? Well, we tried planchette, Allen," said Mrs. Lombard courageously, after a brief silence. "He is tired, and sick, and this is the worst time!" she reminded herself. "And truly—but do you believe in it at all?"

"It doesn't seem to mean much to you that some of the most prominent Englishmen alive do?" he asked, scathingly.

"Yes, I know. But one does seem to want personal proof! But, Allen," said his wife, "this truly was remarkable. It wrote a lot of rubbish of course. I had the word 'bosh' in my mind, and I thought at one time that it was trying to spell the word! But——"

"How do you mean *'it'?*"

She looked at him with mysterious wide eyes.

"Ah, that's just it! Who was writing? But anyway, presently we got the name Grace—Grace was trying to be heard!"

"Nonsense! Someone wrote it!" said the invalid.

"Why, Allen, you were defending it a moment ago!" His wife merely thought this. She had long ago learned to avoid scenes at any cost to her sense of justice or pride. Aloud she said good-humoredly: "Do let me go on! It wrote Grace several times. And casting about for a Grace—as you do, you know, I remembered that my grandmother had been a Grace, Grace Delafield, of Baltimore. So I took my hands off, we all did, except little Miss Warren, who was desperately in earnest. My dear, do you know that that thing—the pencil, call it!—began to struggle with De—and Della—and Field! I assure you that it did, Allen. I sat there quite frightened, really, it did seem so uncanny."

"So you were quite the heroine of the hour!" said her husband unpleasantly.

"No, I wasn't! I didn't tell them. They don't know me, and it would have sounded so flat. Then it got L. Two or three times. I did tell them that that was my letter. And then rubbish—nothing else, and Fred Winship was bubbling with nonsense, as usual, and they brought in supper—and that was all! And now I'll get you your supper. Did the evening go comfortably?"

"As usual," he answered, opening a book. "Your being here makes little difference, you know."

Mrs. Lombard put aside her knitting, rose, raked the fire. She went out of the room, returning with a small iron saucepan, which went, in British fashion, upon the hob. While the evening gruel heated, she straightened the room, handling books quickly, opening the alcove window an inch or two to the winter night.

The invalid had his supper from a Sheffield tray, in a Canton blue bowl. He ate it noisily and rapidly, scooping the tipped bowl forty times with his spoon when he had finished. All his movements had a rheumatic awkwardness. He wiped his moustache with one angry dragging motion of a trembling hand.

Now his wife came toward him with a quarter-glass of hot milk in her hand, into which she was stirring a bitter, dissolving powder. He looked at it jealously; he had powerful salicylates every waking hour of his life, but this precious teaspoonful was an opiate. He had been thinking about it since four o'clock in the afternoon.

Sometimes it did not bring sleep, and he begged the

doctor—unsuccessfully, for a double dose. But Gedney, like all his other physicians, was cautious. He must try hot baths, more gruel, he must avoid sleep in the afternoon.

Mrs. Lombard kept the aspirin powders and the sedative in an adjoining room. Her quiet inflexibility in their administration was a cause of incessant resentment on her husband's part. He hated his dependence upon her, hated every separate evidence of his helplessness day after day. There were moods in which he hated her, for her calm, her patient service, her resolute cheerfulness, her mysterious amber eyes.

When he had gulped down the hot milk to-night, she wheeled him to his bedside in the next room, her fresh, firm young hand touching his papery cold skin as she drew off the warm stockings and fur-lined slippers. The bed was opened, beautifully fresh and inviting; she helped him awkwardly in; his gingerly extended feet touched the warmth of hot water bottles. His grizzled head sank upon a snowy soft pillow, his wife brought the covers evenly up about the humped shoulders. She extinguished the light, breathed a good-night above his already drowsy head, and was gone.

Their program was always the same; it had been the same for every one of the more than two hundred nights in this house, it had been just this in the house in St. John's Wood, in the house in Rosarios, in the New York apartment. While he lived, it must be so, and he might live for thirty years!

His bedroom had been intended originally for the dining-room. His wife's room, and the two servants' rooms, were on the top floor, all small and box-like,

with the shallow tiny closets of forty years ago. Mrs. Lombard's contained only the simplest furnishings: a white narrow bed, a white straight curtain, a blue rug, a line of shabby books on a white shelf. The plaster walls and smooth old woodwork were white.

She came to the dormer window in her trailing blue wrapper to-night, and stood looking down, as Mimi had done, at the trees in the little square, and the fronts of the old brick houses softened and beautified now into romantic loveliness. But she saw nothing. Her face was almost devoid of expression, except perhaps for a little narrowing of the eyes, and the faintest compression of the lips.

After awhile she sighed sharply.

The room behind her was utterly still; candle-light wavered softly over the low ceiling, and doubled itself in the little mirror. Outside, the storm had died away, in the west, but the air that entered the open window was still restless and fresh. The trees moved uneasily in the wet wind, and the moon was riding among tossing clouds. On the opposite side of the square, only three hundred feet away, the silent woman could see the light in the little second-hand book-shop still burning; that, they had said, was the old Curran house. The Judge had been born there, and his sister, Fred's mother.

Her thoughts went to Mimi—fortunate, protected, beloved Mimi, with life so sweet and plain before her!

"She will marry Fred, perhaps," she mused, "and have a nursery full of blonde girls and dark-eyed boys with plenty of money for nurses and schools and country summers! Or perhaps the husband will be the older brother—but how simple it is. She *is* sweet

and clever and affectionate, and the money and the beauty are thrown in!"

And suddenly she knelt down at the old window-sill, over which the kind, good eyes of clergymen's busy wives had for a hundred years looked down into Kingsgreen Square. No one was awake there to-night to hear her whisper:

"Oh, my God—my God! Isn't there ever such a thing as a second chance!"

The routine at the rectory was extremely simple, but unchangeable, as the routine must be in the house of an invalid. At seven every morning the mistress went, sweet and fresh, into her husband's bedroom, and the little maid busied herself in his sitting-room, adjoining. At eight he was in his chair, his thin tangle of grizzled hair brushed, his wrapper neat, the difficult business of shaving and dressing accomplished.

Then came his breakfast, before the fire in winter, beside the narrow eastern window in summer, his wife sharing his tray. After that came a comfortable time of letters, the morning papers, and the half-hour diversion afforded by the hopping and chirping and bathing canaries.

Meanwhile Mrs. Lombard talked with her cook, put on her plain hat and coat, arranged the ten o'clock powder and the glass beside him, and went forth to market, only a few squares away. After the question of chops and asparagus and lettuce had been conscientiously settled, she stopped at the public library. There must be two or three new books every day: travel, letters, biography had first choice, exciting fiction was always welcome, and sometimes an odd

book about such varied topics as Hindoo village life, beetles of Brazil, Russian folk-lore or the making of furniture might safely be hazarded. With these hugged under her arm, Mrs. Lombard usually crossed to the old second-hand book-shop; this was a treasure trove, there was always something here that she could not resist, and, far more generous than the publishers of the world, the old homes of the city were constantly disgorging fresh plunder for her eager hands.

This was the pleasantest time of her day, in the summer morning freshness, or with the bracing winter air bringing color to her face, with the sunshine glinting upon the fruit in the market; in the dim whispering sweetness of the alcoves of the old library, or the tumbling richness of the book-shop before her.

After luncheon, for which she had always to prepare at least the salad and the sweet, the invalid usually fell asleep, and his wife might seize the precious hour for a walk, or for her Red Cross work. He always resented her going, but she knew that she must go, or lose her reason, and on this one point she braved his unending displeasure. She must get away—from the fire and canaries and the dry, sceptical voice—into the open air, where people were laughing and talking, going to theatres, buying shoes for boys and girls!

But she must come back. She must always come back.

CHAPTER III

A DAY or two after her call upon Mrs. Porter, she escaped from the house a little earlier than usual, and made her way briskly, between coal and lumber yards, and across a bridge powdered with coal-dust and sawdust, toward the open spaces where city houses and odd factories thinned into country fields. A mile away were actual barns and meadows, and presently she came to the hillside where a clear little brook ran over big scattered stones and under frail, wind-whipped willows, carrying the great fallen leaves of maple and sycamore leaves with it as it went. Autumn had paved the banks with scarlet and yellow, bright, dry, and pungent in their brief hour, but now the early November rains had soaked them into sodden masses, odorous of the woods, and winter, and decay.

Footing upon the bank and upon the stones and fallen leaves was slippery and uncertain, and climbing up the course of the little creek she paused often, to catch breath and rest strained muscles, and to look downward at the farm roofs and the huddled chimney-pots of the city, rapidly falling below her.

A mile up the slender noisy waterway she came to an immense dry boulder, rising into the winter sunlight, and here she laid her armful of clear golden leaves, and seated herself to study with dreamy eyes the scene at her feet.

The softness and thinness of the dying year was still

in the bright air, but on the farms and the dim blue mountains beyond all the trees were leafless, and the silent watcher could see steam rising from the barns into blue sunshine, and pumpkins piled in orange glory upon the shrivelled and discolored fields. Leaf-fires sent plumes of lilac-gray straight up toward the soft, uncertain sky, and the day was so still that the regular whistling of a crane, far down the river, came faintly to her ears.

Sanbridge, prosperous, bustling, ugly and beautiful, reactionary and progressive, hateful and lovable, as are all American cities, roared through the accustomed business of the afternoon. The woman could see motor-cars parked in diagonals along Washington Street, see other motor-cars, beetles in a toy city, scuttling to and fro. Smoke rose from great brick chimneys, joined its shadow to other shadows, swept lazily south. The interurban trolleys skimmed out between high brick buildings and the captured masts of ships, and fled through the city's fringe of ugliness—factories, sheds, packing-houses, railway tracks, hideous wooden houses and tenements, humming toward suburban cottages—brave little ventures in shingles and art brick, with clothes-lines in the square back-yards, and hooded baby-carriages in front.

To the east lay the finest residential section, secluded in splendid trees, intersected with handsome fences, rich in fine old gardens, and with new garages risen beside the old, high-shouldered carriage stables. From the hill Mrs. Lombard could see the pasture of the Curran house, with a fawn-colored cow and a bay horse respectably grazing.

And to the west lay the inevitable slum, with the

church spires, and the new charity hospital, and the rescue home, rising like fresh wheat above its filthy tares. Between it and the business part of the city, on a little twist of the river, was the old brick church in a feathery oasis of tall trees, the queer little crowded brick rooms of the rectory wedged in beside it. Mrs. Lombard spent some time in identifying the trees to her satisfaction; there was more than one group of old maples and elms in that old-fashioned region. The windows she had no hope of finding, not even a glassy flash in the rays of the declining sun. But she could tell Allen, if Allen chanced to be in a receptive mood, that one could see St. Thomas' from far up on the hill.

To-day he had been playing cribbage with Doctor Gedney, a blessed variation. He might be more serene than usual——

She carried home her yellow leaves, divested herself of hat and wrap, and came into his room with the jar of autumn beauty held high and steadily before her.

"Doctor gone?" she asked, cheerfully, wondering how much of this stale, over-laden air she dared change before the young guests came in for tea.

There was no answer. She set down her bowl, carried him a glass of water, tilted the contents of a powder-paper carefully upon his extended tongue.

"I didn't hear you!" her husband said, suddenly.

The superfluous question would have been nothing but idiotic now, she did not repeat it. Instead she spoke of the walk, and the clear, nipping early winter day.

"I thought this was the day your Americans were coming in for tea?" the invalid said, sourly.

"We're all ready!" she answered, cheerfully. "Bertha has the tray in order, and Hannah was just putting the most delicious pan of graham rolls into the oven!"

"Hannah?" he echoed, scowling. "Oh, you mean Cook?"

"Cook," she conceded, absently.

"So the latest idea is that we are to be patronized by the Sanbridge elect, is it?" he asked, presently.

"Why, no, I wouldn't call it that, dear. Miss Warren asked to call, and to bring Fred Winship and perhaps his brother with her——"

"After seven months, eh?"

"Allen, I can very simply ask them to make it another day!" she countered, with a convincing air of eager consideration. "Shall I telephone them that you are having a bad day——"

"No, I don't seem to lie as easily as you Americans do," he drawled, "and, as a matter of fact, I am having a particularly good one!"

His wife was silent; rejoicing in her secret heart that he did not seem to know that the alcove window was open, and the clean sweet air carrying away the odors of luncheon, and canaries, and of carpets, and of his and the doctor's pipes. She knew he was really interested in the little approaching break in the day's dullness, and that even the prospect of engaging young Fred Winship for cribbage was enough—poor Allen!—to brighten his whole day.

He reached for a fat, shabby public library volume, opened it with a shrug of his thin high shoulders and a nervous settling of his eyeglasses, and composed himself to read.

Mrs. Lombard presently went out of the room,

came back with a small folding table, spread it with a fine white cloth, moved china, clinked silver teaspoons, set a brass kettle upon the hob.

"I propose to have my tea at five o'clock whether your friends choose to be prompt or not," said her husband, looking up.

"You shall, my dear," his wife assured him, amiably, continuing her simple preparations. But she felt a secret relief when, ten minutes before the hour, the bell sounded, and there were voices and footsteps audible on the stairs.

Just two callers; for a special, last-minute emergency had kept the district attorney in his office, and it was only Fred and Mimi who came into the long, dim room. Mrs. Lombard introduced her.

"Miss Warren, my husband, Mr. Lombard—Mr. Winship you know, Allen. Take that chair—Miss Warren——"

"I'm sorry I can't say 'Pleased to meetchoo,'" said Allen, bent only upon being disagreeable. "But to tell you the truth I am not Americanized yet! Of course I recognize the immense superiority of everything American, including your speech——"

"Oh, you're being horribly sarcastic!" said Mimi, with a delightful laugh, looking straight into his eyes with a simplicity instantly disarming, and holding his hand. "Aren't you bad!"

"Mimi'll Americanize you!" Fred Winship announced. "She's the demon limit on patriotism—a Continental Damn, and all that. It was her uncle, you know, who marked the spot where freedom fell—or no, there's a statue where *he* fell, that was it."

"Idiot," Miss Warren commented, sinking into

a chair, and looking about her with pleasure. "He'll gabble that way indefinitely," she explained to her host. "Do keep quiet, Fred," she added, plaintively, "I never talked to a Lord before!"

"Nor I either," Mr. Winship said, vivaciously. "I've come up to Armageddon, to do battle with the Lord——"

Allen's sudden, reluctant laugh rang out, and his wife's face brightened at the unfamiliar sound. Bertha came in with the tray, the delicate odor of fine tea drifted through the air. Fred, leaning forward in the most comfortable, easy manner imaginable, broke the heavy lumps of coal with a brass poker, Miss Warren tossed aside her gloves and her long, loose coat.

A big-tipped hat shaded the animated face, and if Mimi's chief beauty was usually in her clear rosy skin, her wide-open dark eyes and her expression of sweetness and intelligence, there were moments when she was actually pretty, too, and this was one of them. The novelty of this little tea-party, with its silent, mysterious-eyed hostess, its invalided, lowering host, and its flavor of something entirely un-American, was enough to send spirits as blithe as Mimi's soaring at once. All life was joy to her, and the least variation might spell romance.

"But how did you ever happen to find a house in Kingsgreen Square?" she asked, vivaciously.

"How do people usually find houses?" drawled the invalid, unencouragingly. Mimi's bright color came up, but she was unabashed.

"Now you're snubbing me again!" she accused him.

"Oh, on the contrary," he said, won by her simplicity and with his pleasantest manner, "I am quite wondering why Fred hasn't given me this pleasure before!"

"Fred," said Mimi, solemnly, "does not control my movements!"

"I thought he was—I beg your pardon, Allen!" said Mrs. Lombard. He had interrupted her.

"No, go ahead!" he said, ungraciously, glowering at the fire.

"I was going to say that I thought he was your guardian," said Mrs. Lombard, after a second of distressed silence.

"Fred's father, until he died twelve years ago, was my guardian," Mimi elucidated, "after that, Stephen shared it with Uncle Sam."

"Not the gentleman in the striped pants and beaver top hat," Fred explained, with an elegant air, "but Judge Curran—that's who she means by Uncle Sam. No, I'm not her guardian. I don't seem to impress mothers with the desirability of handing me over their fair young daughters. Would—would that I did! I——"

"You could embezzle their trust funds, like the guardians in the movies, Fred," Mimi suggested, pleasantly.

His face grew violently red, and she could see, to her amazement, that she had hurt his feelings, although he laughed.

"Mrs. Lombard——" she began, with a brisk change of subject, and stopped. "Do I call you Lady Lombard?" she asked, looking from husband to wife.

"We don't use it here, under the ideal conditions

of a democracy, where there is no class distinction," Allen Lombard said, harshly. "It seems to be out of place, where there is no poverty and no suffering, no labor trouble, where everything is quite ideal——"

"Sir Allen belongs to an old Scotch clan," explained Mrs. Lombard, simply, "and if we could live in the Highlands—which unfortunately he cannot, he would be the Laird, of course! But the dampness and cold there is very bad for him, and when we travel, and especially in America, it seems more natural to be just Mr. and Mrs. Lombard."

"You know they tell us that American girls are always ready to jump at titles," the invalid said to Mimi, "but, being happily married, I no longer have that excuse for being here!"

The insult was unmistakable, his ugly look went to his wife, and Mimi saw her pale under the warm creamy tan of her skin. Mimi had been rather won, girl-fashion, to the stern, irritable, nervous man, who was yet obviously so travelled, so cultured, and so experienced. But now she felt the indignant blood hot in her face. She marvelled at the composure with which Mrs. Lombard could say:

"Break that coal, will you, Fred? Are you going to let me give you a fresh cup, Miss Warren?"

"What I was going to say was that we know this part of town very well, Fred and I," Mimi said, a trifle hastily, turning a shoulder slightly toward her host. "That old house opposite, where the book-store is, still belongs to the family. That was built by Fred's great-grandfather, old Captain Tom Curran;—that was the Judge's grandfather. His son George was the Judge's father and Fred's grandfather. Who

did your grandfather Curran marry, Fred? How does that come in?"

"He married *someone*, I am sure," Fred said, virtuously, "because he had sons and daughters. And one of the daughters married my father, John Winship, who—lacking heirs male——"

"Oh, shut up!" Mimi laughed. "Anyway, this is the cradle of the race!" she added, turning to Mrs. Lombard. "The Currans bought their new house—it was almost in the country, then!—thirty years ago, but Uncle Sam's mother, old Aunt Fanny, as we used to call her, and her sister, Cousin Mary Dolliver, used to live down here until Aunt Fanny died, about six years ago. I used to come visit them, when I was a little girl. And Cousin Mary's still living—though she is eighty or more, and very indignant because the place is used for lodgers and tailors and a book-store, and all that! Fred, how old is Cousin Mary?" she broke off.

But Fred had turned to his host.

"If you'll give me the Queen, and a couple of rocks, I'll take you on at chess some day!" he offered valiantly. Allen Lombard's eagle eye lighted with pleasure.

"I didn't know that you played, my dear boy! I play very badly, I assure you!" he answered, eagerly, with a gesture toward the board. "My usual game is cribbage, but my wife seems to have an unconquerable aversion to games of any sort!"

"I'm wretched at them!" Mrs. Lombard's extraordinarily sweet voice conceded amusedly. She had risen, to stand beside the low mantel, with one long, velvet-sleeved arm resting upon it. From the sheer linen cuff came the beautifully formed hand, bare and flawless. Mimi, looking at her, noted for the first

time that she was tall, splendidly formed; the simple, worn black gown was open at the throat, and as she leaned forward, her eyes on the fire, there was visible a hint of the curve of smooth young breast.

To Fred and Mimi, even in this sober gown, she seemed suddenly different from the shabbily dressed Mrs. Lombard of the Red Cross work-room and the evening meeting. She had covered her thick hair with a small hat then, she had worn enveloping cloaks and furs. There had been something staid, something unfashionable, in her appearance. It occurred to both, now, for the first time, that she was in reality young, and that she was extraordinarily lovely.

She had a wide, low forehead, under banded masses of soft thick hair of so light a brown that it was almost tawny. Her eyes, her smooth skin, and this rich crown of braids were all of a golden brownness, with an even absence of color, yet shiningly, even brilliantly, alive. The mouth, a warm scarlet, was the only vivid spot in the face; it was a wise mouth, thin-lipped, slow to smile, and showing, when she did smile, her large and splendid white teeth. In her close-set small ears, this afternoon, were quaint round earrings of old filigree and pearl.

"If you will come and play chess now and then," she said, conscious of something a little marked in their regard, and smiling over the trifling awkwardness, "you will be a good Samaritan!"

"Say, I'll do that very thing!" Fred said, eagerly. "And I'll do it to-morrow night, if I may?"

"Dine here," said his lordship, crustily, from his scrutiny of the fire. So it was arranged, and Fred and Mimi began to make a little stir of departure.

"Perhaps you would dine with us, too, Miss Warren?" Mrs. Lombard said, going with her to the stairs in the hallway. Mimi pleaded an engagement; the matter was not pressed. "I like your—squire very much," the older woman added, smilingly, as she fingered, in an affectionate big-sisterly fashion, the girl's collar and fur.

Mimi glanced back toward the sitting-room, where Fred was momentarily delayed over the chess board.

"I wish his brother, Steve, had been able to come!" she said eagerly. "He was so sorry—but you'll meet him soon! *He's*—wonderful!"

"What—more so than this Adonis?" asked Mrs. Lombard, amused.

"Oh, well——" April color was in the girl's face, as she looked up, laughing, at her taller companion. "Stephen's thirty," she confessed, round-eyed, "and he's—he's been a regular father to Fred. Fred is—has been—a responsibility, you know! And Stephen manages us all, my aunt, and my uncle, and Fred, and me—he was joint guardian with Judge Curran until I was twenty-one."

"And have you been twenty-one very long?" Mrs. Lombard's deep and thrilling voice asked, musingly, as with one hand still lingering on her shoulder, she watched the girl's radiant face.

"Oh, I was twenty-two last week!"

"And I was twenty-eight last week," the woman said.

Twenty-eight! Mimi's face showed her astonishment, her glance went in quick, troubled fashion toward the oppressive, lifeless backwater of the drawing-room, toward the middle-aged man who was chained there,

the quiet, forgotten street, the old piano and the old photographs, the coal fire sucking and sputtering, the cuckoo clock hiccoughing half-past five. And this woman only six years older than herself, beautiful, and titled, slipping quietly in to the Red Cross rooms——

"I wish you would come and have luncheon with me some day," the girl said, impulsively. "We could have it at the Country Club, if you like. Have you been there?" And as the other indicated a negative with a faint shake of her head, she went on, "I would love to drive you out there!"

"You drive your own car?"

"Oh, I have since I was sixteen. You—you don't play golf?" said Mimi.

"No." Again the little negative motion, and this time a glance toward the sitting-room. "I take a long walk every day," said Mrs. Lombard. "But I am not free for anything like tennis or golf."

Mimi felt the spell of the poignant voice, and cast about for something consolatory to say.

"Will Sir—will Mr. Lombard always be so ill?"

"We hope not. But it is arthritis."

"And has he been ill long?"

"Not helpless, as he is now. But this is the fifth year."

"Since—not since before you were married?"

"Oh, no. We have been married more than eight years."

It was simply, wearily, almost indifferently said, but the tragedy of it made Mimi's heart close in a sort of spasm.

"All the nicest years!" she said, with shy daring.

Mrs. Lombard did not answer. She had laid one hand upon the yellow-brown fox-skin that was loosely linked about Mimi's shoulder, and she moved this graceful, warmly brown hand idly in the rich fur. Her tawny eyelashes hid her eyes, but Mimi saw her breast rise in a great sigh.

A moment later Fred Winship came out, and carried Mimi away. Mrs. Lombard smiled down at them until they had descended the short flight, and shut the street door. And even when they were gone, she still stood staring absently down into the twilight of the hallway.

Allen liked to brush his hair, and his teeth, and perhaps change to a fresh gown, for dinner. She went up to the sitting-room, where Bertha was clearing the tea-table, and wheeled the big, lightly balanced chair into his room.

It had been a little break, this meeting with these cheerful and normal young people, the evening at their house, the afternoon at her own. But after it the lonely waters of her life closed over her head again. She had been young enough to hope that something might come of it, companionship, an opening in the wide solitude of the seas.

CHAPTER IV

But the days went on, and on, and on. December began to shine, even among the poor little shops near Kingsgreen Square, with red berries and green leaves. Allen Lombard requested that a wreath be hung in every window, and the girlish, obedient hands tied them there.

Winter mornings, frost-bitten windows, and the rich circle of leaves and berries—what pictures of joyous childhood, proud parenthood, and serene old age they conjured up before the eyes of the lonely woman in St. Thomas' rectory! Big tables surrounded with happy faces, fire-shine on the gifts of silver and glass, the backs of books——

Ah, and best of all the hands and voices—the dear loving voices of Christmas-time! Here it was so still.

Bertha was one of seven devoted boys and girls—Bertha had a mother. And Hannah was going to have her little girl out of the Home for ten days, and go to her sister's house for her Christmas dinner. Lord and Lady Lombard—she had liked to hear herself called that, once!—would dine alone.

And she had done it herself—she had done it herself!

Sometimes, on her solitary walks, her thoughts went back across the nine years. She and her mother were in southern France; the girl happy in the motionless village life, the woman restless, ambitious, fretful.

Their income had been microscopic, the mother's nature had long ago made life in the old Baltimore home impossible to them; they had been wandering.

And the girl had been pretty——

Pretty enough to hold a visiting Scotch nobleman day after day, and week after week, at the little inn, walking with her, laughing with her, hanging over her little daisied hat and muslin gown as if there was an enchantment about her.

There had not been any enchantment about him—ever. He had been forty-four, as lean and dry as he was now, as dull and as dictatorial. But the girl's eyes had not seen that, and the mother's eyes had seen her daughter's name with a title, printed in a Baltimore paper! And he had not been bad, as men count badness. He was a widower, he had some money, even though he had wasted more, his was an old and honorable line. He had said that he loved her.

But she had known, on the dull day of their wedding in a London chapel, with his hawk-nosed mother and his pretty daughter behind her, that she did not love him. And almost immediately he had come to hate her mother,—poor, pretty, ambitious Mama, who had always loved her, whatever her faults! And Mama had gone quite triumphantly back to Baltimore, to the companionship of interested aunts and cousins. But Lord and Lady Lombard had gone up to the old place, in Kilmarnock, and had lived with Sir Allen's mother, and his two sisters, and his daughter and her husband, Geoff, a clergyman.

It had been cold, and they had not been tolerant of her Americanisms; it had seemed fair sport to laugh at her, and ask her what she meant. But they had

liked her, and she them. Moira and Daphne, the sisters, had gone to London in the season, and duly became engaged and married. But she and Allen and the Geoffs had stayed at home.

And then had come Allen's illness, and the long, enchanting sea-trip to South America, and the continued losing fight there for his health. Mama had died in a Baltimore hospital during this time.

"Very sorry, I'm sure," he had said, as she read the cable dazedly, in the streaming hot December sunshine of Rosarios. "I've no particular objection to America, now, by the way. We might try it!"

Nearly nine years of it. The best years of her life, little Mimi Warren had said.

CHAPTER V

FRED came twice to dine and play chess and cribbage. She did not talk to him much, because he was absorbed by Allen. One afternoon she came in from a snowy walk to learn that he and Stephen Winship and Mrs. Curran had called. It was too bad to miss them! She had so little——!

Then a few days before Christmas Eve came an adventure.

She was downtown, in a big department store, trying to find a new type of drop-light in which Allen had expressed an interest, hurrying through the morning quietness of the shops, which would begin to boil and seethe in a few hours. Now there was a pleasant silence and space in the wide aisles, and at the counters freshly dressed girls were quietly dusting and arranging stock. Mrs. Lombard was hesitating, in the oriental department, over a cheerful work-basket that might presumably be suitable for Bertha, when she was surprised by a touch on her arm. She turned to smile at Mrs. Curran.

The smile she had in return was so exceptionally bright and eager, and the older woman's round, soft, faded face was so full of joy, that it could not be unnoticed.

"You look as if you were going to have a merry Christmas!" said Mrs. Lombard.

"My dear," the other said, with a caressing touch,

"I do believe I am!" And in an irresistible little rush of confidence she added, "I must tell you. Mimi —Miss Warren, you know, and my nephew, are engaged to be married! They told us only a few days ago. We are all so happy about it! I don't believe anything in his life ever made the Judge so happy! We loved Mimi's mother, you know—she was a wonderful woman. And since she was eighteen months old she has been just like our own child!"

"Fred Winship?" asked Mrs. Lombard.

"Oh, no, Stephen. Fred is—well, he's a dear," said Fred's aunt, with a little deprecatory drop of her head as she mentioned him, "but Stephen—you've not met him? He is really a brilliant fellow—not so handsome as Fred, no. But—well, there's nobody like him! And they are so happy—Mimi has loved him all her life!"

"I must certainly send her a line of good wishes," said Mrs. Lombard, sympathetically interested. "Any plans as yet?"

"Oh, nothing yet. We're only telling a few people. We don't want to hurry—she's only twenty-two—but, Mrs. Lombard," said Mimi's aunt, suddenly, unwilling to be interrupted in the new and fascinating subject, "why can't you come home and have luncheon with me? We keep open house all through the holidays for Mimi's friends—and now I suppose it will be worse than ever! Would—would your husband expect you?"

"I told him I might have a cup of tea downtown to-day, and finish all my shopping at once. . . ." Mrs. Lombard began, hesitatingly. But she was not difficult to persuade; ten minutes later she climbed

into the Curran limousine, and was carried along on the kindly current of the first real family life she had known for years.

The big house was filled with warmth and flowers and winter sunshine; the very maids were radiant; the telephone tingled and tingled.

The Judge gallantly welcomed his wife's guest; two pretty girls came in, furred and rosy and laughing, and the old people had to tell them what they could of the details of Mimi's great news. Fred joined the group by the fire at one o'clock; immediately afterward it was decided that there should be no more waiting for Mimi—she wasn't responsible for what she did nowadays, anyway—and everyone went out to the big, bright dining-room, where a quiet, middle-aged maid was serving bouillon.

Five minutes later laughter was heard in the hall, and shedding bundles and furs and gloves, and as radiant as the day itself, in she came, to a chorus of welcome and congratulation.

Stephen had just the instant dropped her at the door, she told them, slipping into her place at last, and hungrily beginning her meal. Oh, they had had such fun! Meeting people in the shops, and pretending that nothing had happened! And what weather—wasn't it exhilarating? Wasn't the air just like wine?

"Mimi, you wicked thing, you never gave us a hint!" said Marjorie Rutger.

"Oh, Marge—truly!" Mimi answered, eagerly. "I hadn't the *faintest*—but I give you my word I hadn't! Day before yesterday was the big Christmas lunch at the club, you know, and Steve was at our table,

and then Sue Jenkins and Tom and he and I played nine holes, and then we drove home——"

"And he asked you then!" said Marjorie.

"He did not! We went to the Penrhyns' dinner——"

"Ah, go on—tell us, Mimi!"

"Aunt Bessy, isn't she terrible? . . . I'll tell you nothing!"

But Mimi, despite her protest and her crimson cheeks, liked it enormously, and she shone in this great hour like a star. Her bright flush, her glowing eyes, her laughter for her friends, her quick daughterly deference to the Judge, were all charming.

With the dessert, she came over to sit beside Mrs. Lombard, and paid the older woman the tribute of open admiration and confidence.

"Will you let me bring him to see you some day? He's awfully—isn't he, Marge?—he's just awfully nice. I told him this morning that if he hadn't asked me by twelve o'clock on New Year's day, I was going to ask *him!*" Mimi said, joyously. "No, thank you, Aunt Bessy, no more!"

"She's too excited to eat," said her aunt, fondly.

"Well," she laid a satin-smooth little hand upon Mrs. Lombard's, and asked for indulgence with her flashing gipsy smile, "Well, it's the first time I've ever been married!"

"You don't say engaged, Mimi," suggested Grace Leonard, the other girl.

"Or engaged, or interested, or having an understanding," Mimi instantly amended with a little touch of dignity.

"Bridesmaid!" said Marjorie. "You promised!"

"You and Grace, of course," Mimi agreed, her eyes shining. "And St. Gregory's, Aunt Bessy?"

"Your mother and your grandmother were both married at St. Thomas' old church," said Mrs. Curran.

"Oh, but Aunt Bessy—way down there!" Mimi was protesting, when Mrs. Lombard said quietly:

"The church is closed."

Something in her calm and final phrase, or in the tones of her unusual voice, made them all laugh suddenly. It was as if in the midst of a babble of eager children some adult had spoken kindly and finally. The strange fascination of this poised and charming woman seized Mimi afresh, and after luncheon, when the other girls had fluttered away to a bridge tea, she drove Mrs. Lombard home herself, through the sunshiny winter streets. And at the door of the rectory they did not immediately part, but sat on, in the car; Mimi squared about sideways in the front seat, facing her companion, Mrs. Lombard reading the girl's eager face with searching eyes.

"It—it almost seems too much!" Mimi confessed, with a look half-ashamed, half-proud, in her eyes.

"You—you really like him so much?"

"He's wonderful," Mimi said, slowly. "Steve has always seemed so much older, to me. Always so busy, and so grave. His father left debts, you know. And for years he was paying them off—he still is, for that matter. And then he and Fred started the firm—and Fred's *never* been any real help to him!"

"What is it, with Fred?" the older woman asked, thoughtfully.

"Oh, it's the people he *goes* with!" Mimi said, impatiently and unguardedly. "He is always meeting

the *strangest* people!" A sudden sick realization that this was not the wisest remark in the world to make to this particular woman, smote her, and she added, uncomfortably, "I don't mean that Fred hasn't charming friends, too—everybody *likes* him. But gambling, you know, and drinking—young Harry Harvey has a regular cellar full of wine—and wasting time."

"I know what you mean," Mrs. Lombard said, nodding. "And he and his brother are business partners?" she asked.

"Winship and Winship. Of course Fred keeps it going while Stephen is in office. I bore you with our affairs!" Mimi broke off, apologetically, "but it's because I'm so happy!"

The other woman blinked shining lashes suddenly wet.

"Always be happy, Mimi!" she said, musingly.

"I always have been." Mimi, thrilled by the little sign of deepening friendship, answered seriously. "I've been—do you know that I've never known what sorrow or sickness are?"

Mrs. Lombard looked at her gravely, in silence. Her wonderful clear brown eyes were luminous with a sort of awe.

"Don't say it!" she whispered, half-whimsical, half-smiling. And with an immediate return to her usual sensible manner, as she got out of the car, she added, "You have done me good!"

Mimi, thrilled, happy, and vaguely excited, waved a gloved hand; the car wheeled about and was gone.

But Mrs. Lombard did not immediately go upstairs. She walked instead across Kingsgreen Square, under the bare motionless branches of the winter-

blackened trees, toward the smoky, grimy factories near the river, down Oldchurch Street, and into River Street. Sunshine lay bright and cold upon stone steps, and glinted upon frost-traced Christmas windows. And with her went a restless agony of young jealousy and longing. The sight of this younger girl's happiness, the thought of all that her life held of love, beauty, friendship, travel, wealth, burned in her heart like acid.

"And she *is* lovely and friendly, Mimi," thought Mrs. Lombard. "But—but wasn't *I?*"

She remembered her own engagement; her mother warning her that she must keep Sir Allen good-natured, the strange trip to England from France with these two older persons, a London boarding-house, and Mrs. Delafield asking the girl to borrow a hundred pounds from his lordship for wedding-day expenses. How she had hated to do it! How shameful it had seemed to kiss him, and smile up at him, in the dingy parlor, and explain Mama's difficulties. "A check she expected from home has not come. . . ."

He had brought the blood to her face with a shrewd, "Yes, I expected to hear of that check!" even while he counted out the notes into her hand.

The church had been freezing cold; the strange clergyman had smoked at the mouth in the gray dimness. And afterward there had been a few moments of confusion and laughter when they called her "My Lady". And then she and Allen had gone away to Brighton——

Mrs. Lombard stopped short in the street, her eyes dilated. She saw a long, dingy room in a family hotel again; herself taking off the one new hat, trying

to be interested in the old mirror and the vases, the coke fire, the curtained windows giving on the sea—trying to keep down the rising horror of realization that this lean, silent man was her husband—she was his wife, now—she was his wife——

She walked rapidly on. That long-ago bride had not known what was ahead of her then. But every fibre of her clean young soul and body had rebelled. Now, nine years later, looking back, a wave of utter revolt more keen even than that of her marriage day rose over her. How could they—his mother, her mother—let him take her to that room, trapped, cornered, with no way out in the eyes of God or man—innocent little fool that she had been at nineteen——!

Mushrooms! She paused at a market, her thoughts instantly diverted. Allen was fond of them. His wife had an Englishwoman's dislike of parcels, but she carried home a pound of mushrooms in a paper bag.

There was another stop at the old book-store; this was always a joy. She never tired of browsing over the musty heaps of books; often she put them in order for old Monsieur Lejeal, sometimes she even made a sale for him. And here was Disraeli's "Curiosities," which Allen had wanted for years! There was no book in the world that would not slowly rise to the surface here, if one waited patiently enough!

She came into the stuffy sitting-room triumphantly, with her book, her news, and the promised dainty.

"Allen, I had such a nice luncheon—and I heard a bit of news. Little Miss Warren, you know——"

"Please shut that door!" the harsh voice said, unencouragingly.

"I was going to shut it—just as soon as I can lay

down these things! Miss Warren and the brother of Fred Winship—the one you met and I didn't——"

"Are going to be married, of course," he interrupted, eyeing the book. "Oh, you got it, did you? What was the explanation of the delay?"

"Why," she said, a little dashed, "don't you think it remarkable in him to get it at all?"

A pause. Then:

"Do I think it remarkable for a book-dealer to get a book? No, I do not. And what did he ask you for it?"

"A dollar and——"

"I don't know anything about dollars, my dear!"

"Well, about four and six."

"H'm, he's a fool then," said Sir Allen, opening his mouth for the powder she shook out upon his tongue, after a shrewd, discontented glance at her. "It's extremely rare, now. He could have asked a sovereign—the ass. It's in fair condition, too——"

He brooded over it. His wife carried the mushrooms into the kitchen, and looked at the pink silk stockings that Hannah had bought for her little girl, and the bottle of cologne in a case that Bertha had gotten to give her cousin, a widow with four young children. She curried the mushrooms, and made a fruit tart; Allen Lombard's invalidism did not affect his appetite which was that of a healthy man.

His mother was strong and hearty at seventy-five, his grandfather had died only a few years ago, at ninety. Sometimes his young wife pondered on these things.

She sat opposite him at dinner, and when the table was cleared away, took her chair and her book. He

had been silent to-day, as he often was, but now he wanted to read her something concerning the Philistines. She picked up the knitting, that was for Hannah's little Ethel Hildegarde, and listened.

Allen read badly, but with deep interest. His wife listened intelligently, eyeing her work, the fire, and his absorbed face. The room, the house, the street, were all still except that harsh, monotonous voice.

"... 'it has been suggested that this took place not at Ashkelon, but at a small site in the valley of Elah called Khurbet, or ruin, Askalan. This is certainly nearer to Timnath. . . .' Look on the map——" directed Allen, interrupting himself.

She seized an open volume of an encyclopedia.

"Here's Timnath—and here's the valley of Elah——" said the rich young voice.

Presently she was listening again. She heard Bertha go out, heard Hannah creak upstairs. All the clocks said nine—ten—eleven. Bertha came in again, creaked upstairs in her turn.

It was time for gruel, and the tray, and the sedative narcotic powder. Every bone in her body ached with the long strain of sitting still. Every fibre of her soul cried out for something to do—something to think about—something to care for!

She got up, feeling sleepy, chill, stiff. A great yawn took her suddenly, as she went out to the immaculate kitchen. Her head felt heavy, but not with sleep.

The sucking gas-jet, the dim bedroom, the fresh smooth sheets, and the touch of cool, lifeless skin. Then she was dragging herself upstairs. It was midnight. Mimi and her lover were whispering in the mellow light of the drawing-room of the Curran house,

or perhaps they were dining with friends, again, watched —admired—loved. Mrs. Lombard knelt for a long time at the low sill of her dormer window, her chin on her palm, the warm, silent winter night transforming the square below her into beauty, and thought of them, and of many things.

CHAPTER VI

Christmas came and went, with no variation of her days. But the nights were varied in a most unwelcome fashion. Allen, who had until now waited all day for evening and the narcotic powder that brought him seven or eight hours of sound sleep, found it beginning to fail him. By the end of a bitter, dark January, his wife had reason to look back at the earlier winter, and wonder what had ever fretted her, while her nights were unbroken.

He would go off as usual, at about midnight. But between two and three o'clock he awakened, weary, excited, wide-eyed.

His wife would stumble downstairs in her wrapper, in an agony of sleepiness. There would be more gruel, a hot foot-bath, reading aloud; she would watch him compose himself afresh, and herself get what rest she could in an armchair. At three, perhaps at four or five o'clock, he might doze; but she was cold and excited herself then, and would creep upstairs aching and wide-awake, to be perhaps roused from her first deep sleep an hour later.

The days grew dreadful to her with heaviness and headache, the nights were horror to them both. Doctor Gedney, trim, shaven, with his neat little moustache silver-gray against his fresh pink skin, would advise patience.

"I think the bad nights won't last long," Doctor

Gedney said, one dark wintry day, in a sort of soothing sing-song. "That's the main trouble. I think I would try not to think about them—suppose we take the gruel and the morphine a little later? Midnight, eh? Suppose we try that, Mrs. Lombard?"

"He wants *two* powders," she said, frowning distressedly, with a glance at the scowling invalid. But Doctor Gedney became instantly animated.

"Oh, no, no. That's out of the question!" he exclaimed, putting his gold-rimmed glasses deliberately into their case, and rising. "Why, come," he said to his patient, "you've nothing to do but sit here and be waited on all day—some of us other fellows would be glad enough to change places with you for a while!"

And with a quick, bird-like glance from one face to another, the doctor went off upon his rounds.

One evening Fred Winship came out, to play chess, cribbage, anything, until one o'clock. He begged his hostess, who looked utterly worn, almost dazed with weariness and discouragement, to get some sleep while she might.

"I'll show you where the aspirin is," she answered, and led him to the little shelf in the pantry where her medicines were stored. "At nine and eleven," she said, her eyelids falling with sleep as she spoke.

"And what about this one?" Fred opened another box, where folded papers were also neatly aligned.

"Oh, no—that's the morphine, that's the last thing, Fred!" She blundered against him, laughing at her own heaviness. "You are an angel to do this!"

She stumbled upstairs to bed, and, in keen sympathy, he watched her go. It was brutal to call her at midnight, but Mr. Lombard would wait no longer. She must come down, to heat the milk and the gruel, and

arrange the bedroom; she thanked Fred for his care, with heavy eyes.

And at four o'clock she was up again, Allen in a frenzy of rebellion. The next night, and the next and the next, there was not an hour's unbroken rest for either of them.

Despite her fires and her hot drinks, the bitter winter chill was upon the house; outside were the locked icy blackness and the throbbing stars. Lamps made dim pits of twilight in the gloom, clocks struck strange hours. Patiently she fired the stoves, struck matches, hurried about in blinking stupor.

She would pause, surprised. Bells? The Angelus from the little Catholic church behind St. Thomas', of course! But how black the winter mornings were!

The invalid might fall asleep; there was no sleep now for her. She dared not try a hot bath, the bathroom was next to his room, the noise of running water would waken him. She would sit drowsing before the fire, curled uncomfortably in her Chinese silk coat of jade blue.

It would seem good to her to creep to the window, to see sunshine breaking gladly over the snow, and the little book-seller yawning over his first sale. Day again—the blessed, heartening day!

Early in February Doctor Gedney was angrily dismissed, and the night came when Allen Lombard had his double dose of narcotics, and slept for a wonderful restoring ten hours. His wife, sleeping almost as heavily as he did, rose rested and refreshened, and life resumed almost its normal tone. But Doctor Gedney did not come back, and fear—fear of another such hideous time, haunted them both.

Sometimes Mimi came out, to sit murmuring quietly beside the fire. One day she somewhat timidly suggested bringing Stephen, but Mrs. Lombard shook her head in a quick negative.

"Not while Allen is so ill!" she said, positively, with a warning glance toward him. He had fallen asleep in his chair, his florid face looked angry even in unconsciousness, his wiry, grizzled hair was in disorder.

"Then let me spin you up to the club for lunch to-morrow?"

Again the fearful glance.

"Impossible, Mimi, thank you!"

"But you don't get any fresh air at all!" protested Mimi.

Mrs. Lombard looked steadily at her tea-cup, set it carefully on the table; Mimi saw the even suffusion of color under the warm, creamy skin, and the tears that brimmed her eyes and that she made no motion to wipe away.

She laid an affectionate hand over the other woman's hand, and after a few seconds Mrs. Lombard looked up with her usual composed glance, and touched a handkerchief to her wet lashes. And as always, her least slight gesture, and her every quiet look, deepened the fascination she had always possessed for the eager girl beside her. A certain reflected gravity and poise had come to Mimi, even in those few weeks of intimacy with the more developed woman; she told Stephen wistfully that she wished she were more like Mrs. Lombard!

"You are pretty nice as you are, Mimi," Stephen said, with his kindly shrewd smile.

"I *am* nice, in my way!" Mimi conceded, sombrely.

"But I have so much. And Lucretia is wonderful—without *anything*. Tied to that hateful old *villain*——"

"You assume that she doesn't love him? She has said so?"

"Said so! She's not that kind—she never complains. But wait until you meet her, Steve, and see him!"

"Your geese, and Fred's, are all swans," Stephen remarked, indulgently. She was on the arm of his chair, and he had anchored her fast with one of his own strong arms about her. The girlish, thoughtful face was resting against the sleek crest of his hair.

It was one of their rare, happy hours alone; Stephen had brought her home from a dinner he could not attend himself, and although he was tired and silent, and Mimi knew it, he pleased her with a plea for another five minutes, and then another, before the fire. So they would linger, as man and wife, before their own fire, before another wet and windy March came in, thought Mimi, her heart filled with solemn and wonderful content. Her husband—this splendid, dignified, devoted Stephen!

Sometimes she had thoughtful moments of wondering whether she had roused in him a love at all measurable by her own. Their natures were different, Mimi reflected. Perhaps a man never felt as much as a woman. Devoted, tender, thoughtful of her happiness he had always been, he was only more devoted, more tender, more thoughtful now. There was no fire in the pleased, quiet fashion he had of putting his arm about her, and kissing her when they met. There was no fear—no jealousy—no ecstasy—in Stephen. It was all deep and grateful content; she knew he anticipated

their life together as one of unchanging happiness and safety.

Perhaps that was the man's way, the girl thought. After all, if it were not so, why were so many girls anxious and uncertain as to their admirers' feelings, month after month? Stephen had caused Mimi real unhappiness, in the past year, with this kindly aloofness. Sometimes she looked at her ring now, the diamond ring of his mother, re-set for her, and wondered if it was all a dream—that December night when she had been tired and blue, when she had cried for no reason at all, and when Stephen had somehow gotten his arm about her, and had asked her half-smilingly what people would think if her guardian walked off with her and with her fortune?

She remembered that just before this remark she had said, tearfully:

"Yes, you do advise me, and you do like me, but I want someone to *love* me!"

And when she thought of this speech Mimi's face burned, and she wished that she had died before she uttered it! Of course it hadn't influenced him, probably he had not even clearly heard it, yet his answer had been to put that dear and comforting arm about her, and ask her that whimsical question.

Still, it was hardly possible that he could ask more in a wife than the youth, beauty, wealth, and devotion that Mimi poured out at his feet; she would have been stupid indeed not to know that all Sanbridge could not produce such another. And she was wise enough to know that, with a man of his type, marriage would bring a steadily deepening and ripening love, that his home and his children would cement it, and that ten

years from now the devoted husband of Mimi Winship would be pointed out in the town as its most happily married man.

So they were engaged, and except for this faint cloud, Mimi's sky was radiant. She loved every minute of these happy days, and tasted their bliss quite consciously. In the bitter winter mornings she rose late, breakfasted in her room, wandering about leisurely from telephone to dressing-table, scattering letters as she went. Marjorie or Grace might come in; there was endless food for talk.

Then, veiled and rosy, with orchids or camellias pinned on their furs, the girls went out into the bracing sunshine; to shop, to lunch at the club, to meet Stephen perhaps, or to play bridge. Everywhere with Mimi went the aura of the fortunately engaged, and because she was so unspoiled, so frank and sweet and sensible, so unwilling, even now, to monopolize the presents and the good times, everyone rejoiced with her in her happiness.

The trousseau increased steadily, in the biggest spare-room; the old walnut bed was covered with dainty frail embroidered linen, the big walnut wardrobe held wraps and little silk morning-gowns, and the enchanting tweed, and the peacock-blue hat. Wedding garments—always to have their special place in a wife's heart, as long as a feather or a thread of them was left to remind her of the tremulous, radiant hours in which her girl's hands gathered them together!

Sometimes Mimi brought one of them downstairs.

"Steve, look—it's a short coat—you know, to wear with striped skirts for lunch at the club, or even downtown, with a fur. Isn't that stunning? And

look at this frill—June Rogers sent it to me from New York. Wait——!"

And Mimi would clasp the delicate cascade of lace about her throat, and look at him in solemn expectation.

"I know you are very cute!" Stephen would say, with his fine dark eyes shining with affectionate appreciation.

The question of their establishment was troublesome. Mimi had a large house, in quiet, dignified West Maryland Street, only three blocks away from Mrs. Curran, and in quite the nicest block of the old town. But, to her amazement, Stephen was not quite ready to dislodge the present tenant, a prosperous boarding-house keeper, and take possession.

"I'd rather buy you a house some day," he said, slowly.

"Oh, Stevie—aren't you absurd! I don't need the rent," Mimi protested. "And we could fix it over! But it's really too big, of course, and it isn't nearly as delightful as the new houses out Keystone road," she added, diverted—"Steve, could we buy one of those houses? Cream brick, and four bathrooms, and French windows—oh, they are wonderful! Colonial halls, you know, gray and white—six fireplaces in the one Marjorie and I went through!"

"We might rent one, dear."

"But, Steve, why couldn't we buy it outright?"

"Well, we might, some day, when I get the last of my father's troubles straightened out." His manner warned her, but she could not quite subside.

"Steve," she said, gravely, "you *are* going to be sensible about my having—having money?"

The look in the gray eyes was not encouraging.

"I hope so!" he said, briefly. Mimi, rather frightened, dismissed the unfortunate topic at once. Her dream of spindle-backed chairs and four-poster beds in the colonial rooms suffered no diminution, however, and the very next day she bought at an auction a pie-crust table and a mahogany chest that would become no setting so well as a gray-and-white colonial hall.

CHAPTER VII

Mrs. Lombard asked Fred for some of the details, on a certain evening in late March, when Fred had generously given a whole evening to amusing the invalid. She was sewing, in her basket chair, the men had finished a long hard game of chess. Fred told her of various dinners and luncheons, of the blue hat and the chest of silver, and that Mimi had set her heart upon a colonial house in the Keystone Road, which Stephen couldn't buy, and the builder wouldn't rent.

"So they may take an apartment downtown," Fred said. "But there's no hurry. Steve's having my mother's pearls set for her—they're small, but real. I don't know when my grandfather ever had the price of them, myself!"

"You had no interest in them?" Mrs. Lombard smiled in her friendly fashion.

"I had some emeralds, and a diamond—I sold them while I was in college," Fred confessed. "They were no good to me! The pearls are Steve's and of course Mimi is crazy about them!"

"Everything is for Mimi now," Mrs. Lombard mused, smilingly.

"Show Fred *your* necklace!" her husband commanded.

She hesitated, rose obediently. They heard her going upstairs. When she came down, a shabby blue velvet case in her fingers, it was to put into Fred's

hand the most perfect chain of rosy pearls that he had ever seen. Each globe, firm, shining, faintly tinted, radiated a soft lustre; the centre dozen were as large as the tip of a woman's little finger, the others graded to smaller sizes, to the diamond clasp.

The warm, soft, young hand that held this age-old miracle of beauty touched Fred's hand, and woman and jewels thrilled him suddenly together. He glanced up, and her exquisite, serious face, with the firm sweet mouth the only line of colour in the golden tones of skin and eyes and hair, suddenly seemed to him as incongruous a treasure, down here in dingy Kingsgreen Square, as were the matchless pearls in this stuffy, over-crowded room.

Such a woman, as a woman, had small appeal to Fred; she was too silent, too reticent, too much aloof. He admired her, he was sorry for her, but she was not much "fun." But to-night, for the first time, a sense of genuine pity and loyalty toward her stirred in his heart. Imprisoned here——

"You can see how often we have use for them," Allen Lombard said, drily, reading his thought.

"Great Heavens—they are gorgeous!" Fred stammered.

"They belonged to the Dundonalds," said Mrs. Lombard, seating herself on a low hassock at Fred's knee, and cascading the rich tumbled mass of them from one smooth palm to another. "Allen's aunt married the Laird, and—when she died, gave his mother the pearls."

"Put them on," said the invalid, harshly.

"In this old frock?" But, as always, she obeyed him, lifting rounded young arms, bare to-night, and turning innocent, wise eyes to Fred, for his approval.

The perfect jewels lay upon the perfect skin, and their glow seemed to add a certain shining light to the amber eyes, under the somewhat tumbled masses of amber-colored hair.

"By George—you look beautiful!" Fred said, with a sort of awkward boyish earnestness. Mrs. Lombard smiled as she laid the necklace once more in its case.

"I haven't worn them for more than a year," she said, simply.

Fred walked away from the house, an hour later, with his mind full of her, and her tragedy.

"She ought to divorce him, the old grouch," said Fred to himself, adding instantly, "She can't, I suppose. But she's got a gay life ahead of her for the next twenty years!"

He stopped at a drug-store; the narcotic powders and the salicylate prescription were almost gone, and he had told Mrs. Lombard that he would have no trouble in filling the prescriptions again for her.

"Put up about fifty of each of those, Kelly," he said to the clerk. "And deliver them at the district attorney's office some time to-morrow, will you?"

The chemist, whose expression had been dubious, brightened.

"That's all right, if it's for Steve Winship," he returned, amiably. "I thought I might have to telephone Gedney, do you see? But I guess it's all right. Just sign here, will you, Fred? Here, under March twenty-sixth."

"Thanks, Kelly." Fred sauntered out. "I could have sent 'em straight to her," he reflected, "but this gives me an excuse to run out and see them to-morrow or Saturday!"

CHAPTER VIII

After several days of half-frightened, half-daring thought, after business consultations with Uncle Sam and the real estate agent, and after she and Marjorie had inspected the cream-brick colonial house from its fascinating gabled attic to its roomy cement basement, from its sidewalk row of young maples to its airy big garage, Mimi decided to go ahead upon her own responsibility in the matter of the house, and trust to her deepening influence upon Stephen to reconcile him to its beauty and comfort when the right moment for revelation came. It was a very simple matter to make a first payment, and swear Uncle Sam and the agent to secrecy. Mimi began to watch for an opportunity for confession—no man in the world could be so proud as to resist the joy of these brick fireplaces and tapestried walls!

Just a week after Fred's evening with the Lombards, when he had been shown the pearls, she came home weary from a day of great adventures, to have tea, to dress for a dinner at the Rutgers', and to meet Stephen downstairs at seven o'clock.

She must come home early to-night, she reminded herself; the next day she and Marjorie and Ted had planned to drive up to the little cabin on Red Pine Mountain, seventy miles away, to see what the spring was doing to Mimi's beloved hemlocks and pines, and how old Matea had survived the winter. Mimi's

father had had lumber interests there years ago, but the place had no real commercial value now. However, the girl loved to spend eight or ten weeks there every summer, and often the young people of Sanbridge went up for happy week-end visits in the spring and fall, to cook, tramp, ride horseback, and glory in the mountain freedom. Matea, an old Italian woman, sometimes with visiting sons and daughters, more often alone, lived there all the year long.

"Steve," said Mimi to-night, with the fragrant kiss of greeting she gave him in the dim hallway, "*can* you go with us to-morrow?"

"I think so—I'm to telephone at eight, and if everything's serene, of course I'll go!" he answered, appreciative fond eyes upon the slender dark-eyed girl in her silver gauze.

"You—are—a—*darling!*" And he had another kiss, and laughed with a little pleasant embarrassment as his aunt panted toward them from the drawing-room. "I saw dear old Cousin Mary Dolliver to-day," Mimi recounted, happily, between them in the closed motor-car, "and there was a sale of white enamelled saucepans at Grant's, and I bought—oh, forty! And, Steve, a ducky white-painted table and four chairs for the servants' little dining-room——"

"What if we have seven servants?" Stephen asked, in great spirits. "But seriously, Mimi," he added, "we may not have a servants' dining-room, much less the four——"

"I just said to the clerk to set it aside!" Mimi amended, hurriedly. This dangerous topic was close to her wonderful secret; she pressed Mrs. Curran's foot with an agitated silver slipper, and the Judge gave a tremendous "Ah'm!"

But Stephen was blessedly unsuspecting, and merely said, good-naturedly:

"Go ahead and buy up the city, Mimi. We'll have an auction sale on the sidewalk of what won't go into the apartment!"

"He won't be cross one second!" Mimi assured herself, gladly. She had experienced some little trepidation, with her delight, in the thought of presenting this independent young district attorney with the identical house that he had said he would not permit her to buy.

But to-night he was wonderful—so much the sweetest, and cleverest, and finest man among them all! Everybody listened to him, and deferred to him, moving about with such dignity and charm; the sleek dark head bending so interestedly over tiresome old Grandma Rutger's chair, the finely built square figure always at its best in evening dress!

He brought her home at about eleven o'clock, and she knew—and was thrilled to know—that he was beginning to look forward to their little late talks over the drawing-room fire. She tossed her wraps off in the hall, and led the way to the waiting chairs, and loved him for quite deliberately moving his own close to hers, so that his big hand could hold her fingers while they talked. There was something infinitely exciting, to the watching girl, in his quiet manner, his quiet glance, the obvious pleasure with which he sank into his chair, and the smile he gave her without words.

"Mimi, this is nice!" he said, simply. And then suddenly: "What's that?"

For there was the slam of the street door, and the sound of quick feet in the hall.

It was Fred who was in the doorway, excited, pale, and in haste. As Mimi and Stephen got to their feet in amazement, he came toward his brother.

"What is it, old boy?" Mimi did not miss the ready affection and solicitude in Stephen's tone. Fred, somewhat out of breath, put a detaining hand upon Stephen's shoulder.

"Say, Steve, I'm awfully sorry to bother you. But you can help me out of a bad hole!" he said.

Stephen did not answer in words, but in the gray eyes, narrowed to their pleasant smile, there was a mingled look of loyalty, amusement, even a certain satisfaction that this beloved younger man should turn to him in his need.

"You were driving Harry Harvey's car, positively not more than fifteen miles an hour——" Mimi prompted, one bare arm slipped through Stephen's, her bright face resting lightly against his shoulder.

"Oh, my Lord, no—nothing like that!" Fred, heartened by sympathy, caught his brother's hand and looked with a grin at Mimi. "You're a prince, Steve!" he said, gratefully. "But this isn't me. It's friends of mine—the Lombards. They're—she's in serious trouble!"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Mimi exclaimed, swallowing down the first bitter little pang of jealousy she had ever known. How Stephen loved Fred—how Stephen loved Fred! Fred who, with the charm and the affection, had given him so much care and worry——! "What is it, Fred?" she made herself say.

"It's Mr. Lombard." Fred turned from her to his brother. "He's been an invalid for years, Steve. Well—you see—he's dead."

"Dead!" Mimi whispered. Stephen looked grave.

"He was kind of dopey this afternoon," Fred explained. "I stopped in at about five o'clock, and Mrs. Lombard told me that he had gone to sleep in his chair—the first time it ever happened, and she was going to try to get some sleep; they were both worn out, with bad nights. And that was all I knew, until half an hour ago, when she called me up at the club, and said that she had been trying to get Gedney—but he's out of town—she was all broken up——!"

"What doctor was there?" Stephen asked.

"Well, that was it. They didn't have one! They'd dismissed Gedney, do you see? Steve, you'll come there with me, won't you?" Fred interrupted himself, imploringly. "I said you would. She doesn't know what to do!"

"But listen a minute, Fred. This looks like a case for the coroner; did you tell her that? No doctor, you know. It's perfectly simple——"

"No, but that's just it! We don't want Reilly messing around there. Poor girl, she's sick with bad nights and worry and everything else——"

"Poor girl? Is she young?"

"She's a lot younger than he is!"

"She's lovely," said Mimi, trying not to feel slighted and hurt. "I wish I could go!"

Stephen gave her his big-brotherly, lenient smile, but did not take her seriously enough to answer her. Instead he turned his troubled eyes to his brother.

"I don't see what I could do there, Fred."

"But, Steve, will you just come? That's all. Just to let me tell you the whole thing—truly, truly, I need you!"

His brother looked at him keenly; then his face lightened.

"Why, of course I'll come!" he answered, simply. "If Mimi will excuse me. I'll get my hat and coat right away."

"You must go, of course!" Mimi said, bravely. He hardly thanked her, hardly acknowledged the wistful little smile she gave him. He and Fred were hurriedly assuming coats and hats; she heard a murmur from Fred concerning a taxi; Stephen's answer that his car was at the door. She looked after them, a film of hurt tears over her bright eyes. Of course it was terrible about poor Mrs. Lombard, of course Mimi would want everything possible done for her. But—why need Steve be involved? He had never even seen her. Yet at Fred's request—and when did Fred not have a request of some sort?—he had dashed away from her——

"He doesn't love me as I love him!" faltered Mimi. A weak impulse toward tears shook her; she fought it off bravely. "Never mind," she promised herself, between shut teeth, "the time is coming when he *will!*"

CHAPTER IX

"Now tell me about all this, Fred," Stephen said, taking his place at the wheel, settling his eyeglasses, and glancing at his brother.

The car moved rapidly through the deserted streets; the April night was soft and warm, there was a smell of earth and new grass in the stirred air.

Fred sketched the little household in the rectory.

"Here's the trouble, Steve," he finished, anxiously. "She's afraid she overdosed him, do you see?"

"*Afraid* she overdosed him?" Stephen echoed, sharply. "Doesn't she know?"

"Well, now listen. He's been taking this narcotic powder for months—it's Gedney's prescription," Fred explained. "He had a fight with Gedney, last February, and dismissed him. And since then, things have been awfully hard for her—for them both. He hasn't been sleeping. I know she gave him two powders instead of one once last month, because she told me so herself, and so did he. He was almost crazy!"

"Did it on her own responsibility, did she?"

"It was his."

"But no doctor?"

"Nope. He wouldn't have one!"

"Go on." Stephen turned the car westward, toward Kingsgreen Square. Fred looked at his face hopefully.

"Well, last night I was there, and he was raising the

deuce. He was always getting ugly, like that! She cried——" Fred's voice thickened. "He made her cry," he said, with a dry throat. "I never saw her do that before!"

"You're there a good deal, Fred?" his brother questioned.

"I—like her," Fred answered, slowly. "Nothing like that!" he added, quickly, as a flicker of a smile crossed Stephen's face.

"Go on," Stephen encouraged.

"She has some pearls—he gave them to her," Fred continued, "and last night he was talking about sending them to his daughter, in Scotland, since he hadn't a child of his own——" He stopped short.

"This was before you, eh?"

"Oh, sure. That was it! She came out to the stairs with me, and she said that they were both half-mad for sleep—she'd been begging him to let her get in a nurse, but he wouldn't. Said he hated nurses. Standing out there in the hall, she was leaning her head against the wall—with weariness—poor woman! Well, anyway, when I went in this afternoon, she ran down to the door, and she said that he had fallen asleep at last, and she was going to try to move him into bed, and that then she would get some rest herself. And that was all I knew until she telephoned to the club, about ten o'clock, that he was failing, and of course I hurried over—and by George, the old boy was gone! The maids were standing around like ghosts, and she was kneeling beside the bed, calling to him——"

"And how does she account for this sleepiness, this sudden going off?" Stephen, who had been listening attentively, asked sharply.

"That's it, Steve. She's afraid—this is the house, next to the church!—she's afraid she gave him the wrong powder."

The car stopped at the rectory; Fred got out. Stephen dubiously followed him across the sidewalk to the doorway. About them the old square was silent in the April night. The trees, above the shabby railings of the park, were unfurling new damp leaves, in the living darkness, the sky was thick with stars.

"That's our old place over there, Steve, with the light in the basement, do you remember?"

"Sure enough." Stephen smiled, but his face immediately grew grave. "I don't like this business, Fred," he said, looking up at the rectory.

"Just come—talk to her!" Fred implored.

"One minute, Fred. Where did she get this sleeping stuff?"

"I got it for her—the last time. At Kelly's."

"I see. It looks to me like a case for Reilly, Fred. If it's all plain sailing, he simply fills out a certificate of natural death, or accidental dosage. Unless there's something wrong, he wouldn't have to let the thing go to a jury—probably won't want even an autopsy. There's no reason why she should dread——"

"But will you just come in and talk to her, Steve!"

Stephen looked at his brother, in the dark doorway.

"Go ahead!" he nodded.

Fred immediately opened the front street door, and they were in the hallway, at the foot of the short flight of stairs. He turned up the gas, and they quietly mounted to the floor above. The opened door at the top admitted them to the familiar, crowded sitting-room.

It was empty, unlighted except by the dying fire and one dim gas-lamp. Glints of firelight touched the bowls and picture frames, and the backs of books; there was a sweet, haunting odor of lilac blossoms in the darkness. The windows were open to the warm spring air, and white curtains moved fitfully over the sills.

The wheel-chair was gone, and the bedroom door closed. There was nobody in the room.

But immediately the frightened red-cheeked cook came quietly from the direction of the kitchen.

"Yes, sir, he's gone—the poor man," she said, in answer to their look of inquiry. "She's in there, with him. It was only an hour or two ago that she begun to think he looked queer——" added Hannah, with a rising inflection of terror.

"There's no necessity for a scene!" Stephen reproved her.

"No, sir, I won't!" she said, whimpering and subsiding.

"Did a doctor get here?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Lombard was asleep until almost ten o'clock. She'd give him his medicine at eight, and then she dropped off And when she finally got the hospital on the 'phone, it was—God rest him, he was gone!" Hannah interrupted herself, with a quick sign of the cross. "They said it was a case for the coroner," she whispered, with staring eyes.

Stephen studied her thoughtfully a moment, turned to his brother.

"That's what it is!" he said, in a low tone, with a nod. "You might stay—if it would be the slightest comfort to her, but you can see, of course——"

"Sh-sh!" Fred glanced at the bedroom door. "I think she is coming."

The door opened while they watched it, and Mrs. Lombard came out. She evidently had not heard them, for her eyes were upon the candle she carried in an old-fashioned brass stick, and one spread hand guarded the flame. Fred spoke, and it was with this rosy light upon her serious face that she looked at them.

A rich braid of fair hair fell over the plain Chinese undercoat of greenish-blue that she was wearing, silky little tendrils framed her close-set ears, and touched the warm brown column of her throat. In the eerie candle-light her strange eyes blazed like topazes, she looked taller to Fred than he had thought her, her mouth was crimson in the colorless creamy brown of her face.

She came quietly to the centre-table, and put down her light, giving Stephen an earnest and anxious, almost a frowning look, as he was introduced.

"You are very good to come," she said, without emotion. The echoes of her astonishing voice seemed to come back from the walls of the quiet room like the echo of a bell. She had taken Stephen's hands in both hers, and she still held them as she glanced about for a chair. "Sit down," she added, quietly, nodding at Fred, and sitting down herself.

The maid went out; Mrs. Lombard's eyes moved quietly from one brother to another, she seemed in no hurry to speak. Stephen, confused by her utter unlikeness to what he had anticipated, entirely unable to classify her, eyed her with a serious and critical scrutiny.

"I want to tell you about this," she said, presently. "Did you give your brother an idea——"

"I would like to hear it from you," Stephen said, directly.

"Yes," she said, in a suddenly hurried manner. "Yes. I'll tell you. I am afraid—in fact, I know, that I have given my husband three morphine powders since two o'clock. I confused them with the powder—the salicylate powder, that he has always had, every two hours, for his arthritis."

"How did that—how *could* that happen, Mrs. Lombard?" Stephen asked, gravely, with his keen eyes upon her face.

"He had the rheumatism powder at twelve—just as usual," she answered, quickly. "I always poured it into his mouth, and he had a glass of water."

"And the morphine powder, when did he take that?"

"Oh, the very last thing at night, in hot milk!"

"So, to-day——" Stephen prompted.

"To-day," she took it up, "he had another powder at two. And he complained then that it tasted sweetish—so that I touched the paper to my own tongue. But we had had artichokes for luncheon, and I thought that perhaps they might have made it taste so—as they do water. An hour later, I was getting ready to go out, when he said that he felt curiously sleepy. It was such a strange—such a wonderful feeling for him! I coaxed him to stay awake until it was time for the four-o'clock powder, and then we helped him into bed—we have had such dreadful nights, I thought he was simply over-tired, as I was! Then—that was just before you came, Fred, I walked about the square, and came in and had tea, and wrote a letter—and still

he slept. I went into his room, at six, he was still drowsy—said he had had such a wonderful dream!—and I persuaded him to take another powder, and drink just a cup of tea. And then I went upstairs, and threw myself down in a wrapper, and went to sleep—I went to sleep——"

An agony of anxiety and a tinge of excitement had begun to sound in her voice; neither man moved or spoke.

"I slept until ten!" she said, pitifully. "Bertha waked me—she wanted to know if nobody wanted any dinner. I came downstairs, I felt almost sick with sleep—my first sleep in so long!—and I said I would have some soup. But first I went into Allen's room, and the minute I saw him—the minute I saw him!——"

Her voice deepened upon a note of terror; she was still.

"He was gone?" Stephen said, sympathy in his eyes.

"No, not quite—not quite." She took up the story bravely. "He was breathing, but his hands were cold! I called Hannah—he had never been like that! We got hot water—we couldn't make him drink it—*nothing*—we could do nothing! Bertha telephoned for Doctor Gedney—he couldn't come. So then we called the Emergency Hospital—Hannah suggested that—I thought we might move him there. But it was too late! While we were talking, it was all over. He just sighed—that was all! That was all. He has always said—always hoped—it would be like that—poor Allen! Poor Allen!

"At the hospital," she added, after a moment, "they told me that it was a case for the coroner. The *coro-*

ner!" she echoed, troubled eyes upon Stephen. "Mr. Winship, why did they say that they would send the coroner?"

Stephen, feeling a secret relief that Reilly had been notified, explained quietly the nature of the coroner's office, but this did not alter the doubtful, almost antagonized look in her eyes.

"But I don't like the idea of a coroner coming here!" she said, simply. "Will you explain to him exactly how it happened, and get rid of him as quickly as you can?"

Stephen, glancing at Fred, said nothing. But she had turned from him, to take two of the small boxes from Kelly's pharmacy from the table.

"These are the boxes—identical," she said. "The covers are interchangeable—do you see? The powders *look* the same. They were on the shelf together."

"Mrs. Lombard," said Stephen, gravely, "to keep them so was surely a great mistake!"

"Oh, it was—it was!" she agreed. "I don't know why I never *thought* of that!"

Her simplicity somewhat disarmed him, but he gave no sign of softening.

"You had no doctor?"

"Not since February!"

"Could Mr. Lombard possibly have changed those covers himself?"

"Not without excruciating pain," she answered, shaking her head.

"Did the maids ever touch the medicine?" Stephen pursued.

"Oh, never!" He liked the quick, uncalculating way in which she answered with the truth.

"Mr. Lombard was entirely helpless?"

"No-o, not quite. He could just drag himself a little—you know, I told you, Fred," said Mrs. Lombard, turning her deep, shining eyes upon the younger man, "that he *did* get his revolver, two weeks ago—how, we have no idea. I had to take it away, and this time I sold it, rather than have it about!"

"He was depressed, then?" Stephen continued, almost eagerly.

"Oh, very. He was terrible—to Bertha and Hannah. In fact—" She paused, searching obviously for an exact word—"in fact, this week has been *exceptionally* bad," she finished, quietly. "There are the boxes, if you want them," she added, rising, "I think I will go upstairs, and dress. But I will be ready before the coroner comes—just in case he wants to see me, too."

And with no other word, and without noise or stir of any description, she went from the room, and left the brothers standing together by the fire.

Stephen moved irresolutely, looked at the closed door, and then with an odd look resumed his chair, and settled himself quietly. Fred, after a somewhat puzzled stare at him, followed his example.

Except for the fire, and the clocks striking midnight, there was a long silence in the room. Stephen turned the page of a book he had picked up idly, glanced about at the homelike clutter of handsome and cheap furnishings, the photographs and the flowers. There was no sound in the house, none in the old square.

When Reilly, the coroner, rang, Fred admitted him, and the three men murmured in low tones together.

"It looks to me like a clear case of over-dosing,

Frank," Stephen presently told the alert-faced, rosy little man, tranquilly. "We know that Mr. Lombard was depressed almost to melancholia—poor fellow; it was incurable, you know."

"Can you blame him?" the coroner said, sympathetically, with a glance toward the closed door that concealed, as he had instantly known, the chamber of death.

"He had a strong medicine—Gedney's prescription, although he had dismissed Gedney," Stephen explained, "and we don't know—we don't *know* that he didn't manage to change these box covers—see here!"

"I see," the coroner said, with a faint, significant stress upon the first word, as he studied the labelled cardboard. "Sure, why wouldn't he?" he added, confidentially. "Old man, wasn't he? How does the wife take it? No need to give anything out to the press boys," finished Mr. Reilly, briskly, "bad enough for her without that! Heart failure—hey? My wife's mother went off with rheumatism—just like that! Suppose we step in there, Steve?"

"Sorry the Emergency got you up," Stephen said.

"Oh, the boys and I were sitting in an all-night poker session, anyway," admitted Mr. Reilly, with a grin. "You know these people, don't you, Steve? She's a friend of yours, isn't she?"

"Oh, certainly!" Stephen said, assuredly. "My aunt's extremely fond of her, and so is Miss Warren."

"All O.K.," the coroner murmured, satisfied, noiselessly opening the bedroom door.

He and Stephen were gone for only a few minutes, but Mrs. Lombard, quietly dressed in unrelieved black, was standing with Fred by the mantel when

they came back. She looked at Stephen and the coroner with an expression of sober expectation, but without—Stephen saw—a trace of real anxiety or fear.

Reilly returned her look with frank curiosity and sympathy.

"This is too bad," he said, somewhat clumsily. "Mr. Winship here has been telling me about the case—nervous, depressed, suffering a good deal, and all that. It looks to me like heart failure, maybe the medicine he took helped it along a little, and maybe it didn't. Anyway, you must try to look on it like it was a relief to him, and you are the one that has to have the real sympathy—it's them that's left, isn't that right? Every time—that's what my wife says."

"Thank you!" The strange eyes were looking straight up at him, and were brimming with slow tears.

"So I'll be going along," said Reilly, shaking her hand heartily, after a moment's somewhat confused pause.

"And I will, too," Stephen added. And to Mrs. Lombard he said, with an air of friendliness and intimacy, "Fred will look out for everything for you, and Mimi and Aunt Bessy will probably be here in the morning! And of course don't hesitate to call me if there is anything in the world that I can do!"

"Thank you!" she said, simply, again. "Give Mimi my love!"

And before he left the room, she had turned away and was murmuring to Fred about some grim detail of the immediate need. The usual dreadful questions were to be settled; Stephen and the coroner were free to let themselves out into the sweet warm night together.

A soft high breeze was moving steadily in the dark; heavy with the breath of growing things, fresh earth and new grass and quickening boughs. The maples in Kingsgreen Square were unfolding little damp tight leaves, branches were clicking against each other softly and mysteriously; even in the blackness there was a knowledge abroad of tulips and lilacs, a new softness and freedom everywhere. Girls' voices laughed out from some invisible park bench, some of the doorways of the old brick houses were open, silhouetted figures moved against lighted, shabby hallways, and shadowy forms upon shadowy steps bore testimony to the coming of spring.

Stephen declined Reilly's offer of a lift, he would leave his car for Fred—there might be need of it before morning. He wanted to walk—to breathe in the balmy fresh air, and to think.

Suddenly he laughed, half-aloud. He had certainly taken a good deal for granted, regarding this cool, imperious, troubled woman! He really knew nothing about her, despite his quick assumption of friendliness, before Reilly.

"For all I know—or Fred knows——" he mused. She was the adventuress type, of course, glittering eyes, glittering hair, red mouth. The titled husband—the reputedly famous beautiful pearls—the mixed medicine boxes—"However, she is a lady, that's perfectly clear," Stephen decided, quickening the steps that had halted for a few seconds, while he doubted and wondered.

Yet he had not quite liked her ready acceptance of his little deception of Reilly; her "love to Mimi" offended him vaguely. Her whole manner was almost too easy and quiet, the extraordinary circumstances

considered. She had been strangely familiar with expediency in this sudden catastrophe.

"Mr. Winship, why did they say that they would send the coroner?"

Her tones came back to him so clearly that he almost felt as if they had sounded upon the silence of the deserted streets. He remembered her distressed almost resentful tone, the wide-open amber eyes.

It was a wonderful night, humming and throbbing with spring. Stephen felt his pulses racing like a boy's —it seemed good to him to be able to help a gentlewoman like Mrs. Lombard over this difficult bit of road. He meditated over another call upon her tomorrow; she had shown no extreme gratitude or warmth to-night, to be sure, but even in that was there not another proof of her clear conscience in the whole affair? No fawning, no policy, nothing but the simple, untouched truth.

"I don't know what to think of her!" he said to himself, reluctantly mounting his own steps. The night seemed too warm, too fragrant, too palpitating with beauty and promise, to leave.

Late the next afternoon he drove Mimi to the rectory, and they made a correctly brief and sympathetic call. Fred was already there, everything seemed serene and smoothly ordered.

Mrs. Lombard's face was colorless except for the young crimson of her mouth. Her extraordinary voice was poised and steady, and the amber eyes had strange glints and sparkles in them as she stood, a slender figure in fresh, simple black, beside the mantel, looking straight up into Stephen's face.

Suddenly he had a mad desire to interest her, in some way, to experiment with the cadences of that rich voice, and the expressions of those young, yet infinitely wise, eyes.

"But look here," he said, in the kindly authoritative and detached tone he used with Mimi, "how about yourself? Have you had anything to eat?"

There was something like a weary smile in the amber-brown deeps of the eyes, almost a glimmer under the brown lashes.

"Oh, thank you! But I don't seem to feel——"

"That's nonsense! The surest way to make yourself ill!" he said, at home in his familiar rôle. "You must have something at once, of course! Bertha," he added, with his pleasant, gray-eyed smile for the maid, "you must bring Mrs. Lombard——"

"Hannah was asking didn't she want any soup?" the maid said, submissively.

"Truly, Steve is right!" Mimi pleaded, resting a slender hand upon his big coat sleeve, and smiling encouragement at the older woman.

"I think it must be a characteristic of his," Lucretia Lombard said, in her slow, deep tones. "I will! Truly I will!" she promised them. "But you must have no concern for me," she told Stephen, "for what I *really* dreaded—what might have been *really* hard and unspeakably painful for me—you spared me, last night!"

The emotion in her voice, the look she gave him, as she quite simply laid both her hands upon his own, stirred them all. Here in this cluttered room, with winter twilight struggling at the windows, and only the fitful light of the sucking coal fire indoors to combat it, they were all conscious of romance, of a beauty and an

atmosphere unfamiliar to their wholesome and normal lives.

"Steve, you were so wonderful!" Mimi said, affectionately, driving home a little later with a comfortable sense of neighborly duty rendered—the sort of thing she and Steve would always be doing for the less fortunate, she told herself.

"Extraordinary!" he said, under his breath, and Mimi laughed.

"No, I didn't say *she* was—I said *you* were!"

"Oh—!" He dismissed it with a half-shamed, half-amused smile, and a jerk of his broad shoulder. His eyes did not leave the street; Stephen was a careful driver.

"But *do* you think she is extraordinary?" Mimi pursued, curiously, after thought.

He did not hear her; was thinking of a case, she decided. And Mimi snuggled herself into her furs, on the front seat beside him, and fell into pleasant anticipations of the visit to the cabin on Red Pine Mountain, planned for the following week-end. She had considerately postponed it, because of Mrs. Lombard's need for Fred, and she glowed with the knowledge that her life must be affected, from now on, by what concerned Stephen and his brother.

They were getting out of the car, at the side entrance of the Curran house, ten minutes later, when Stephen absently and vaguely answered her:

"Yes. Of course I do. She is quite—amazing."

Mimi laughed again, fled into the house, dismissed the matter from her mind. But Stephen lingered inexplicably, only half-conscious of what he did, in the garage, loitered upstairs, mused over his dressing.

"I—don't believe," he said to himself, standing with his black evening tie in his hand, and looking at the Stephen in the mirror as if he had never beheld himself before, "I don't believe I have ever seen such a woman! She is not like any one I ever met!" And with a smile playing over his firm mouth, he murmured: "'I think it must be a characteristic of his!—You spared me, last night'!"

With what a superb directness she had said these things; no stammering or flushing! And with what poise she had agreed to have some tea; there was a refreshing absence of the inconsolable and dramatic attitude.

Golden eyes—golden hair—creamy gold skin, and a voice of pure gold!

He wondered if it would give her the slightest comfort to have him attend the quiet little funeral service next day. Fred would be there, of course, and possibly the British consul and his wife, from New York; no one else. Suddenly Stephen felt that he must be there, too. And at the thought of her, veiled and robed in black, sustaining the dismal demand of this dark hour with her own wonderful gravity and dignity, his heart stirred strangely.

CHAPTER X

"MARJORIE!" Mimi said, suddenly, out of a peaceful silence.

Miss Rutger, buttering a muffin, eyed her expectantly. The mountain visit had ended a fortnight earlier, but there had been a dance the night before, and the girls had come home weary and happy, to sleep together at the Curran mansion, and waken late in a still, warm May morning. Nancy, Mrs. Curran's square, motherly, middle-aged maid, had brought them up a luxurious tray, and they were sharing it in the pleasant south window. The soft morning air poured over Mimi's window-sills, and reflected light from the new green of the motionless maple boughs gave a pleasant summery gleam and glint to Mimi's gay chintzes and wicker chairs.

Outside, in mid-morning, the atmosphere was summery, too. The chickens, up the Judge's old-fashioned side lane, were fluffing in the dust, with serious little undertoned cluckings; the rusty old bay carriage horses were standing at the bars, Toby's nose against Dandy's cheek, long tails swishing now and then at the season's first flies. Over this quiet, residential part of town the plumy tops of trees rose against a deep blue sky, and homelike glimpses of brick walls and colonial dormers showed through the steadily thickening foliage. Now and then a motor spun down the wide street, and the

breakfasting girls could hear the mellow note of its horn as it turned into Washington Street.

Two children chipped by, talking clearly; the screen door of the kitchen banged, and Emma's laugh was heard, over Bobby the chauffeur's deep voice.

"Marge," said Mimi, pushing her basket chair back from the table, and tossing her crumpled napkin on top of the litter of dishes, "you've known Steve Winship all your life—now, tell me—there's something I'm awfully worried——"

She halted, choked. Marjorie regarded her with a mixture of amusement and scorn.

"For Heaven's sake——?" she began, amazedly.

"No, I know!" Mimi said, hastily, regaining self-control. "But this is what I meant. Now, you know the house out in Keystone Road—we *couldn't* live in that old West Maryland Avenue house, with one bathroom for nine bedrooms!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Marjorie said, frankly.

"Well, you know I bought that Keystone Road house?"

"Well, certainly. Doesn't he like it?"

"Oh, yes," said Mimi, dubiously. "I think he *does!*"

"Why, he seemed perfectly delighted about it, to me!" Marjorie said.

"Oh, did he, Marge?" Mimi asked, eagerly. "Tell me what he said!"

"You heard what he said—when we were all at Belle's."

"I remember." Mimi's tone had fallen somewhat flat. "It didn't seem to me that he was very enthusiastic," she added, in a sorrowful tone.

"I don't know what he *wants*," observed Marjorie. "There isn't anything handsomer or lovelier in town than those houses——"

"No," Mimi said, in the same tone. "It isn't *that*."

"Do you mean that he'd rather fix up the old West Maryland place, Mimi? You could stick in a few bathrooms, you know. And of course the trees are older! But that's yours, too, as far as that goes!" reasoned Marjorie.

"Well, that's just *it!*" Mimi, looking rosy and earnest, and charmingly dishevelled under her tumbled dark hair, threw herself back in her cushions, and linked her hands behind her head. The ribboned laces of her loose, lacy transparent morning robe fell back from her bare ankles and slippered feet.

Marjorie, now perceiving the delicate nature of this affair, was a little flushed, too, as she looked seriously at her friend.

"You mean that Stephen doesn't like the idea of your being rich?" she asked slowly.

"I'm not rich!" Mimi protested, with an uncomfortable little laugh. "There was a balance there, when I was twenty-one, nearly two years ago. And I had always said to Uncle Sam that some day I would buy a home with it!"

"Did Steve say anything that made you think he —he didn't like it?" Marjorie pursued.

"No—o. But he looked a little—firm," Mimi confessed.

"Oh, Mimi, you imagine it!"

Marjorie rose, tossed her own napkin upon the breakfast tray, and began to saunter superbly about the room, extremely conscious of the wonderfully draped

Indian wrap that she had wound skillfully about her silk night-gown. As she passed Mimi, she gave the top of her head a reassuring pat.

"My dear, you'll have a beautiful home," said Marjorie, firmly, "and if Stephen Winship doesn't realize now how lucky he is, he will some day! Father says that there's nothing to prevent him going straight on in politics; he says Stephen is right in line for Senator—he *did* say so! And this man I was telling you about—a perfectly fascinating man—a Californian, but he's lived in New York for years, and he's been everywhere——"

Marjorie's friends were all of this distinguished type, and Mimi did not listen. Her eyes were troubled, and in her heart she was suffering the pain of the first real check her gaiety and confidence had ever known.

Steve valued money, but he valued other things more. He had worked hard for his own prosperity, he knew the value of every dollar that had gone to pay his father's debts, to help educate Fred, to make Winship and Winship what it was, one of the trusted younger firms of the city. Stephen had refused his uncle's help, at sixteen, had studied and struggled tirelessly and successfully to bring order and profit out of his father's tangled affairs, had divided his college years with hard sessions of responsibility and legal investigation.

Mimi's face flushed with shame, and she saw exactly what her airy purchase of the too-handsome wedding present might seem to him. It was insufferable to her that she had been so stupid and so impulsive, and generously and quite as impulsively, too, she began to rack her brain for the right amends.

She and Marjorie had planned the inspection of a certain set of Pembroke dining-room furniture to-day, but Mimi was listless and absentminded, in the reedy, odorous dimness of the big furniture store, would come to no decision, and left Marjorie early in the afternoon, with a plea of faint headache and spring languor.

She would sell the hateful house, she told herself, driving rapidly homeward, and she would never say "house" again until Stephen had found something that he was wild about, something that *they*—not she—could afford. And that—Mimi felt tears behind her eyes—that might put their wedding off indefinitely!

Her heart rose with a great spring of joy and reassurance when she saw the rough tweed overcoat in the hall, and heard his voice in the dining-room. Mrs. Curran was loitering over a late lunch, Stephen had evidently just come in, and as they sat down, he announced that he must immediately go off again.

"I've got to go out the Hadley road, to see a man," he said, his big warm hand still over Mimi's, who was beside him, "and then Uncle Sam wants me to see Lejeal—that's the old second-hand book-man, down Kingsgreen way. Lejeal wants a room on the first floor there, for his overflow stock, and I'm going over some old trunks and stuff of my father's—stored in there. I don't think that there's anything worth shipping to the Keystone Road house," he added, with a smile for Mimi. "Nothing 'period'—nothing 'colonial'—only some walnut chairs and a bureau, and the boxes."

She did not brighten, the sweetness of his attitude toward the new home choked her, and she looked down

at her own fingers, held in his, with suddenly suffused eyes.

"Why, look here—look here!" he said, gently, exchanging a quick, surprised glance with Mrs. Curran. "What's the trouble, little girl?"

"Nothing!" said Mimi, with a gulp. And with a laugh, half-angry at herself, she added desperately, "Talk!"

Stephen and his aunt immediately began to talk at random.

"Steve, will you leave a little note for me with Mrs. Lombard? I thought she might come to lunch Friday. You and Mimi will be at the club, and she must be frightfully lonely!" Mrs. Curran said, hastily. "Will she stay there, do you suppose? Wasn't that an awful thing, the husband dying—when she was so devoted, and all? I asked Fred how she was left, and he said with very little—she told him that she was going to let one of the servants go—I think that was it! But he says she has a fortune in jewels,—pearls, and that big diamond she wears."

"She seems an unusual sort of person," Stephen observed.

"Handsome, I think. She seems quite friendly with Fred—I tried to tease him about her a little, but you know what a funny child he is when it comes to anything serious! I don't believe Fred will ever marry!"

"She wouldn't look at Fred," Stephen said, positively.

"Wouldn't?" Mimi said, animatedly, looking up with slightly reddened eyes, but with perfect self-control.

"Well, do you think so?" Stephen asked, more moderately.

"Fred says," Mrs. Curran contributed, suddenly, "that she pays only sixteen dollars for that house—imagine *that!*"

"Oh, *help!*" Mimi said, faintly, with her thoughts upon the colonial house in Keystone Road. "I was thinking of the prices of some of the things Marjorie and I were looking at, to-day," she smiled.

Stephen smiled back, encouragingly.

"And what did you see that you liked?" he asked.

"Oh, I adore you when you are so sweet and generous, and when I am such a spoiled brat!" Mimi said, but not aloud. Aloud she said, as his aunt vanished in the direction of the kitchen, leaving them alone:

"Steve, you feel happy about the new house, don't you?"

"Why, what do you think I wanted—the city hall?" he asked, bringing his chair a little nearer her own.

"But you *will* like it," coaxed Mimi, "when the old rugs go in, and the chintzes—I thought just plain net curtains, Steve? And the four oil portraits in the library. And *severe*——" she added, making her own pretty mouth severe and widening her eyes childishly.

Stephen was close enough to give her an unexpected quick kiss between the appealing eyes.

"You're very cunning about your new house!" he said. "And here I am, loafing," he added, jumping to his feet, "at almost three o'clock! What do we do to-night—the Jenkins?"

"Grace will come here and go with us, and be early, won't you? For it's Margaret Anglin afterward. Steve," Mimi followed him into the hall, "have you a minute to-day to see that Pembroke set?"

"If *you* like it——" he began, eloquently. But as she came close to him and laid one hand lightly on the overcoat that he was buttoning, her face was clouded and she did not raise her eyes. "I may be a little late," he said, dimly conscious of her mood, "where is this set?"

"Oh, never mind!" Mimi said, lightly.

When he was gone she stood looking vaguely at the closed front door; after a few moments she went slowly upstairs to her room. It was the most hateful hour of an untimely warm spring day. Everything was glaring and glittering, thought Mimi fretfully; she was nervous and excited, and it was too early to make any plans for tea or calls.

"I'm *not* tired!" she said, resentfully, throwing herself down in the steamer chair, where the bright day had begun so happily a few hours ago. Again she locked her hands behind her head, staring absently at the brilliant pair of china ho-birds that were an engagement present from California, and that she had thought would be so wonderful on the white mantel of the new house——!

The new house. The thought of it brought her mind instantly to Stephen, and tears of bewilderment and disappointment came to her eyes. Why wasn't he more interested in it? Didn't most men love to fuss and shop over chairs and tables, colonial mirrors and Chinese teak-wood?

Finding the house, she had had a vision of Stephen and herself delighting in its furnishing. She had seen them loitering through shops, excited over an antique bureau or a Bokhara prayer rug.

And suddenly Mimi began to cry, got to her feet,

stumbled blindly to the door and locked it, stumbled back to bed, and cast herself among the pillows big and little, pressing the babyish silk and embroidery to her streaming eyes, whimpering a little audibly sometimes, and at others nervously conscious that if Aunt Bessy heard the least suspicion of a sound, she would be frantic with concern and curiosity.

At half-past four Grace and Suzanne came in, to carry Mimi to the Country Club, and Mimi, just brushing her hair, was pale, quiet, interesting. The girls asked no questions, but the little hint of trouble cast a new glamour over Mimi, which she appreciated in spite of herself. She had decided by this time that it was just Steve's adorable big lovely way, he was far too deep in his work and his responsibilities to worry about eighteenth-century veneering! As for herself she was an "idiot," and if she wasn't extremely careful she would be one of these jealous, exacting wives who made life a burden for themselves and everyone else!

Refreshed by the storm, and rapidly regaining her bright color, she chattered and drank tea in the very centre of the group at the Country Club, and decided to take, from that time forward, a more rational tone with Stephen, and show him how sensibly and frankly she could appreciate his indifference to the lesser points of householding.

CHAPTER XI

The cloud on Stephen's own spirit, although she did not suspect it, was far darker than that on Mimi's own. He hardly realized himself exactly the significance of the half-hurt and half-resentful feeling of which he was conscious now and then, when the material aspect of his engagement to Mimi was considered.

Mimi was rich, but not rich enough to tempt a rising young politician of Stephen's calibre to anything like fortune-hunting. Mimi had always quite frankly trusted and admired and loved him, but for years that had not been enough. It was not until a new feeling for her had stirred him, not until his protective, brotherly feeling had been blotted out by that sudden impulse of devotion to her, and of need of her, that he had put his arm about her, and asked her what the world usually thought of the guardian who carried off the heiress?

And then the storm of congratulations had begun; everyone was so delighted—too thoroughly delighted, in several instances, to be quite considerate of the prospective groom's point of view. Aunt Bessy had said that now, thank God, nobody could marry the child for her money. Uncle Sam had prophesied that there was nothing to keep the boy out of the Senate now if he wanted to go to Washington! His own record, exulted the old man, his political backing, and now his wife's money!

And Mimi had bought the Keystone Road house——

Driving out toward Hadley, Stephen mused upon these things, with a rather cynical smile—a smile that Mimi had never seen there, on his fine grave face. If the girl had been vaguely disappointed in her ideal of engagement days, perhaps he was a little disappointed, too. This might have been the time of so much earnest and anxious and happy planning, he thought—they might have solved together the problems of what rent, what service, what entertaining, they might afford. On his own modest income they might have taken a small apartment, Mimi would have had to do her own housekeeping, or a great part of it for awhile. A good case for Winship and Winship would have been cause for rejoicing; they would have gone together to get the new kitchen table, or the six Canton plates.

But now——!

He rallied his common sense as resolutely as Mimi had done; after all, this was utter absurdity. Mimi, as heiresses went, was sweetness and unspoiledness itself, and she grew sweeter and more reasonable every day. Struggling with all sorts of financial tangles, ten years ago, would the old Stephen have recognized this exacting gentleman, rising in his profession, commanding a fair-sized income, driving his own car, and betrothed to the finest girl of his acquaintance, who also happened to have wealth to bring him?

Stephen laughed. But there was a little sentimental, simple streak deep in his soul, nevertheless, and this simple and sentimental Stephen would have liked to be giving more, and taking less, now, less envied by the world, but prouder in his own heart. The

deep sweetness of the May woods, the hazy softness of the spring afternoon, roused in him a certain ache of longing, and a sense—the keenest in life—of having missed the true flavor of living, of having been cheated of what is a man's richest heritage of love and service and labor shared.

Along the country roads bridal-wreath and acacia were in bloom; maples were painting tender shadows again across the rain-packed brown roads. Everywhere was the delicious rustle and gleam and shine of new foliage. Stephen, his errand concluded, was sorry to turn back toward the town, whose roofs were shining in a dim haze of motionless smoke, with here and there an occasional window catching a gleam of full sunlight.

He crossed the Oldchurch Street bridge, moved more slowly through the canyons of factory town, where trucks were backed against open warehouse doorways and the air tainted with raw coffee and oils and straw packing. It was just four o'clock when he stopped outside of Lejeal's second-hand book-shop, and looked about for the old man.

In the pleasantest hour of the spring afternoon all the square was alive. Shawled women and running babies lined the park benches, rejoicing in warmth and greenness, and in the balmily lengthening day. The shining, sinking light lay tenderly upon the balconied old faded brick houses, doves circled the tower of old St. Thomas', and walked with rapid little twisting motions of their tiny bodies, where oats had been spilled near the curb.

Stephen looked up at the windows of his grandfather's house; there was a little cardboard sign

"Rooms," in what had been Madam Curran's beautiful bedroom. The French windows of the drawing-room—and what a pleasant room it had been, long and plain, and filled with a New England captain's sea-plunder of Chinese chests and Spanish fans!—were sealed now, and he could see the raw, chalked back of a bureau pushed against one of them. On the top floor, the plain small casements were lined with stringy geraniums and dry vines in rusty tin cans.

Outside the book-shop, long tables filled with shabby books were ranged in the brick area; mildewed old books, green and brown and faded black, topped with inky signs, "Any Book Five Cents," "Any Book Ten Cents—Two For Fifteen."

A woman in black was standing by one of these tables, her plain hat, with a narrow rolled brim, smothered in a thin, transparent mass of veiling, her slender white hand sharply outlined against the unrelieved blackness of her plain dress. Mrs. Lombard.

She was turning the pages of an enormous old-fashioned book, held in half-idle, half-amused absorption by the beaded mantillas and fringed shawls and tipped little flat hats; she looked first at Stephen's hand, then up at his face, and then gave him her own hand, with a surprised smile.

Stephen had an odd, unmistakable impression that he had done exactly this thing before, and with it a quite indefinable sensation of lightness and joy. The afternoon, softly descending toward twilight, seemed suddenly luminous and exquisite, heavenly, with the opalescent lights that are not of land or sea, that had nothing to do with the dingy books, and the running and shouting children, and the decayed old mansions,

yet that embraced and enclosed and illuminated all these, and all life. There was something a little weary, a little drooping and relaxed, about this end of the long, warm, untimely day, and Stephen was conscious of a corresponding languor in his own heart, a creeping sense of warmth, and the pushing of green grasses, and the drifting odor of lilac.

Her voice—he had forgotten its extraordinary cadences. He gave her his aunt's note, and explained his errand in Kingsgreen Square.

"Sure enough, this was your grandfather's home?" she smiled. "I remember, Fred—or Mimi—told me!"

They looked up at the windows: Stephen took from her the heavy books she was carrying.

"No, you mustn't hold those!" she said. "I'll have Monsieur Lejeal send little François across to the rectory with them! But look at them first—what a treasure I've found!"

There were six of them piled in threes, securely tied several times about with strong cord. Stephen read "Lives of the Queens," in dull gold upon the dark blue backs. Books and string were equally dusty, and gave forth an acrid stale odor of must and decay. The stout tops of them were discolored a dark brown and the cloth was crisp and splitting with age.

"This is a treasure, eh?" he asked, expectant eyes on her face.

"Oh, rather!—I don't dare open it here, because—as you can see!—they've been tied up for ages. I'll have to clean them, and brush them up a bit. But I was so pleased to find them! I was puttering about in the back of the store, putting it in order, really, for old M'sieu Lejeal, when I came across them, jammed

under a counter for dear knows how long. He wanted to present them to me—I don't imagine that they have any real market value—but I wouldn't let him do that. So I set a price of three dollars upon them, and rang it up in the cash register myself."

"Three dollars apiece," Stephen smiled, with an instant relieved thought that there could be no real financial need for a woman who could spend eighteen dollars so easily.

"Oh, dear—dear!" she said, in an amused undertone, as if to some third person, "what frightful standards he has! No, no—three dollars for the set!"

Her composure, her tone, her beauty, and the fact that she wanted these presumably dry old historical volumes, reassured him pleasantly. He had not seen her since the night of her husband's death a month ago, and in the meanwhile Fred's reports, and his own thoughts, had often brought her to mind. It had been an odd episode, and Stephen had more than once told himself that theoretically he had had no right to vouch so high-handedly for this unknown, beautiful, mysterious woman, who had herself admitted to carelessness, if to nothing worse, in the matter of administering a dangerous medicine.

But he told himself now that this was a gentlewoman, everything about her inspired confidence, respect, admiration. The circumstances of her husband's death had been unfortunate, in their implication of youth and beauty driven desperate, yet here she stood using her long-jeopardized freedom for no more sinister purpose than to live in old St. Thomas' rectory, and buy second-hand histories from Lejeal.

Before they could more than greet each other,

Lejeal himself came out from his dim, book-cluttered lair; he was delighted with the landlord's prompt appearance, and promised that the junk dealer who was to buy and carry off the old furniture would immediately join them. Mrs. Lombard was evidently a great favorite with the old Frenchman, and murmured to him in his own tongue, while she consigned the precious bundle of books to his care.

Solari, the junk dealer, descending from a disreputable wagon drawn by an almost collapsed dirty white horse, opportunely arrived. He was a stout, patched, jolly old man, unshaven and bristly, brilliant smiles following each other upon his oily dark face. All four—for Mrs. Lombard was as frankly interested as a child—went upstairs together, and entered together the musty, dusty, darkened old room where moths and decay had had their way for so many years. At the long windows shutters had been closed, and tied with strips of cloth, and odds and ends of sunburned paper had been further tacked across them, to exclude the light.

Stephen jerked these down, with a gingerly finger and thumb, opened the French windows, and let in the fresh air. The sense of romance and adventure was still strong upon him. Any door might open into fairyland to-day, Solari and his dirty horse might turn into the chariot of the sun. He hardly looked at Mrs. Lombard, hardly spoke to her, but there was not a movement nor a word of hers that escaped him.

The streaming light revealed furniture piled against the walls, just the commonplace bureaus and chairs that he had described to Mimi, forlorn and dirty and discolored, their scarred and unfinished backs ex-

posed to view. Nondescript and moth-eaten draperies enveloped some of them, and in a grooved and shiny old wooden kitchen table Mrs. Lombard's casual investigation unearthed a worn vegetable knife and one rolling nutmeg.

She stood at the window, looking out, while the men negotiated. The backyard was evidently the playground of children of all sizes; there were dolls and dishes upon a soap-box, in the shade of the largest maple, a small home-made wagon and various bottles indicated a dairy industry in a corner, two goats were tethered to a pole, a rickety ladder, rising into an elm, ended at a rickety platform, and whatever the children of poverty-stricken Kingsgreen Square could collect in the way of planks, ropes, wires, wheels, boxes, chains, and pulleys, was distributed generally about the place.

But the soft sunlight was shining down upon this disorder through the scarcely unfolded foliage of the trees, and at the backs of other houses all about women were chatting and airing babies and hanging out clothes. On one grassy enclosure a delicate old woman was sitting, yellow-white hair strained away from a waxen scalp, peaceful bloodless hands folded together.

"Isn't it pleasant?" said Mrs. Lombard to Stephen at her shoulder.

He did not answer immediately, and she looked up at him obliquely in surprise. The smile on his face was almost one of confusion, but immediately it changed into his kindly, familiar look.

"Nice to have things opening up again," he said. "It has been a long winter!"

In her turn she smiled a little bewilderedly, some

flutter of her own senses surprising her. She said to herself that Stephen Winship had a fashion of making one feel young—and beloved—he was like some affectionate, proud uncle or big brother, confident that one deserved, from all the world, his own generous estimate. He made her feel that she signified something in life—that she meant something as a human being.

The business with Solari concluded, she delighted the old foreigner with a few sentences in Italian.

"I've forgotten half of it!" she smiled to Stephen. But the junk dealer would not permit this. The Signora spoke beautifully,—like a Roman lady, indeed.

The room was to be cleared, Lejeal should have immediate possession, Solari should cart away everything but the little trunk of letters.

And for the little trunk of letters Mr. Winship would ask his brother to send at once; they were probably of no value at all, but there might be something worth saving among them. Mr. Winship was to be married and some day would take the trunk to his own home.

Solari beamed his satisfaction with these arrangements; the gentleman was to be married? They understood that he was congratulating them both.

"Oh, hear him!" Mrs. Lombard smiled, amusedly, without confusion. She set him right maternally, in Italian, and Stephen thought her lack of any self-consciousness admirable. No, *she* was not to marry the Signor. No, another signorina, bella, ricca, giovane. "I think he is actually disappointed!" she finished, to Stephen, calmly. "And why not store the trunk at my house?" she suggested, immediately. "Then you can send for it at any time!"

CHAPTER XII

So it was arranged, and at five o'clock Mrs. Lombard and Stephen walked across the square together, and went up to the familiar sitting-room, unchanged except for the absence of the big chair. Hannah, soberly smiling a welcome to the friend in need, was sent for tea. Mrs. Lombard went into the bedroom, returning without her hat, and with her magnificent crown of fair hair a little crushed, and curling in the unruly little ringlets that he remembered, on her soft brown forehead.

The windows were all open to-day, and there were jonquils in bowls, and the odor of violets. And whenever he smelled violets afterward, Stephen thought of this hour, and of the beginning of this friendship.

Yet nothing about it was extraordinary; a quiet call upon a woman recently widowed, in this odd, homely little establishment. Nothing in their even ripple of conversation, or in the bent bright head and the idle white hands, accounted for the subtle disquiet that ran in his veins.

They spoke of Mimi, and of the excitement at the Curran house, and of the mountain cabin, which Mrs. Lombard hoped some day to see. And they spoke of Mimi's father and mother, and of Stephen's own people—all early dead.

She told him her plans; she would be obliged to stay on for a while—a year at least—until Mr. Lombard's

small estate was settled. Fred was attending to the matter for her; there was a good deal of red tape to be gone through with. She thought to remain where she was; she liked Sanbridge, liked existence in the old rectory with the devoted Hannah, liked the pleasant, quiet life of Kingsgreen Square. She had books and her Red Cross work, and just the few friends that she needed; she wanted the peaceful interval, to recover balance and to restore nerves.

"The care of an invalid must have made your life extremely hard," Stephen ventured.

"Not if one loved the invalid," she answered, simply. "If Allen had been—what I thought he was, years ago, then *nothing*—nothing!—would have been too much, nothing enough! But long, long before the rheumatism began, I knew—and I think he knew—that our marriage was a fatal mistake in both our lives."

It was evenly said, in her liquid, quiet voice, but the frankness of it shocked, and a little distressed, Stephen. After all, the man had died less than a month ago!

"I had—for years, the sensation that I was not living, that I had somehow lost touch with real life," she added, after an untroubled pause, and quite as if she were thinking aloud. Her echo of his own thoughts, a little earlier to-day, quite softened him again. "Now, it is all beginning to come back," she said. "Women in the neighborhood—books—children—they all seem to me what they did when I was a girl!"

"It is rather extraordinary that you should say that," Stephen said, when the thoughtful voice died away. He was astonished with the readiness—more,

with the eagerness—he felt in talking to her. Every word that she said seemed to inspire in him the desire for a reply, and he looked at the clock with an actual resentment against the steady passing away of this unusually pleasant half-hour. "It is extraordinary that I felt that same thing, to-day—perhaps it's just the spring coming back. But when I was standing there in front of old Lejeal's book-shop, I had the strangest feeling of having done it all before, and feeling peaceful and happy—like a boy—you know. Just as if life never could be hard or complicated again!"

"And that reminds me!" she said, suddenly. "My darling books! Hannah," she added, to the maid, who came in with the tray, "will you take these books, and wipe them off, and cut the string?"

Hannah gave her an indulgent glance. Stephen was quite struck with the brilliant, affectionate look Mrs. Lombard gave the bulky woman in reply.

"Hannah's wonderful," she said, quietly manipulating cups and tea-pot, when the maid was gone. "She is to have her little girl here with her, next week. That makes it much pleasanter for her, and—since I am all alone, it is no hardship for me!"

"I think that is awfully kind of you," Stephen said, finding the hot tea and the plain brown bread and better delicious.

She smiled at him innocently, contentedly, over her own cup.

"I must positively disclaim kindness," she answered, with a little pretty deliberation over the phrase, "for this means economy. Hannah is paying eight dollars board a week, for her child. Some of that comes off her wage."

"And you must think of economy?" he asked, a little clumsily.

"I must live," she was quite simple about it. "No more dipping into capital!"

"Can it be done?" he smiled.

"Can it be done!" she echoed. "It can be done delightfully. I shall have books, and Hannah, and perhaps some day I will buy a baby Airedale, and ask Stephen and Mimi Winship to tea——!"

The simple little summary, and her first use of his name, warmed his heart suddenly and dangerously. He felt an impulse to put his hand over hers, and tell her that he thought she was very charming. Instead he let her fill his cup again, and felt again resentment against the clock that was hurrying this fortuitous and happy time.

Mrs. Lombard was silent, her eyes dropped, her delicate white hands holding the fragile cup. And Stephen was content to watch her in silence.

Hannah came in with the books. Mrs. Lombard brightened, put down her cup, and eagerly taking them in her lap, handed one to him for his approval. Her eyes glinted gold as she rummaged through the stiff, stained, yellowed pages.

"You have the first—'Matilda of Flanders'," she said, animatedly, leaning against his arm.

"Look at Matilda," Stephen commented, pushing up the tissue-paper that still clung to the old steel engraving. "No nonsense about her!"

"Elizabeth has a whole volume to herself, and here are the poor Queens of Henry the Eighth," exulted Mrs. Lombard. "I shall begin this to-night——"

"Look here," Stephen interrupted, displaying the

fly-leaf of the first volume, where faded ink writing was visible.

Again the vital, fragrant young figure leaned against him.

"'George to Grace'," Mrs. Lombard read aloud, "'Baltimore, April eighteenth, 1852.' George to Grace! Perhaps this was a suitable love-offering seventy years ago!" she added, looking up with a smile. "But look—here's more!" she added, turning idly to the title-page.

Bending over it together, they read in a girl's clear, flowing hand:

"Grace Delafield from her friend, George Curran."

"This must have been from my grandfather's library!" Stephen exclaimed. "But I didn't know that we ever sold any books. He was George Curran."

"But—but—but——" Mrs. Lombard was actually stammering in her excitement. "But my grandmother was Grace Delafield!" she said, amazedly. And for a moment of utter astonishment they looked blankly at each other.

"Grace Delafield *was* my grandmother's name," the woman said again, ending the little pause.

"George Curran was certainly my grandfather," Stephen persisted, seriously.

"And was he ever in Baltimore?"

"Oh, yes, I think so."

"You don't *suppose*," Mrs. Lombard said, slowly, "that your grandfather gave my grandmother these books!"

"Isn't that an extraordinary thing!" Stephen mused, staring at the faded inscription as if he could see beyond and through it. "Now let's think it out.

Old Captain Tom Curran was born in eighteen hundred, and my father about eighteen-thirty, I think."

"That would make him twenty-two when he fell in love with my grandmother!" Mrs. Lombard said, eagerly.

"Oh, he fell in love, did he?" asked Stephen, amused.

"Well, of course he did! And Grace—let me see." In turn she began her own calculations. "I am twenty-eight," she mused, "and my father, Morgan Bannister, would have been thirty when I was born. That takes him back to about eighteen-sixty, doesn't it? Say that he was born in eighteen-sixty—his mother was Grace Delafield Bannister—I've seen it on her gravestone, poor Granny!—and he was her third child. So she was probably married at about eighteen fifty-four or five, after—" her eyes moved to his with charming gravity, almost reproach—"after her little flirtation with your grandfather!" she said.

"This is the strangest thing I've ever run into in my life!" Stephen said. "My grandfather got over it, anyway," he boasted, with his whimsical smile, "for he married Miss Fanny Rose, of Sanbridge, and lived happily ever after!"

"Nor did my grandmother die of a broken heart," Mrs. Lombard retorted, composedly. "Think of them," she mused, in her rich, low voice, one beautiful white hand touching the yellowed pages, "hoop-skirts and ringlets, and singing 'Champagne Charley' and 'Juanita'! George and Grace—you poor things! But perhaps," she added, in a hopeful tone whose absurdity, under the circumstances, made him laugh, "perhaps it was just a family affair—aunts and uncles suggested that dear George make little Grace a nice present! Perhaps they hated each other!"

"No, I don't believe it was that!" Stephen said, with an unsteady laugh. He was conscious that he was losing his bearings a little, he had a confused desire to say something quite perceptibly foolish.

"And was 'Bohn's Historical Library' the acceptable gift with the young and fair of that day?" he asked, at random.

"Bohn?" she echoed, sharply. "This is Strickland!" For answer he indicated upon the cover, under the author's name, the three words he had read aloud.

"But that——" she said, almost dazedly. "Now *that* is simply amazing! Did—did any one of us, your aunt or Fred or Mimi, tell you of the night we tried planchette, at Judge Curran's house?"

"Just said that you *had*," he answered, puzzled by her excitement.

"Well——! But wait a moment!" she said. She went quickly out of the room, and when she returned she had a large folded sheet of paper in her hands; paper pencilled erratically from top to bottom with words, scrolls, and hieroglyphics. "There! That's what planchette wrote that night," she said, sitting down beside Stephen, a little pale, and spreading the sheet on the arm of the chair between them. "Look! Bohns—Bohns—do you see it? And George, George five or six times—and Grace Delafield—see! Field, and Grace, and Della—we asked if it was Della. And see here! 'This is not Della!'"

And for perhaps a minute they sat staring at each other; their eyes wide with amusement and amazement, and even a little fright.

"This is mighty queer," Stephen commented, entirely at a loss.

"It's extraordinary! I never believed in it—before. Did you? But you can't question—you can't question that *something* is here that we don't understand."

"Well, I wouldn't let it worry me," Stephen said, slowly, his half-smiling and half-troubled eyes still upon the scribbled sheet. "But this is more than mere coincidence," he conceded.

"We were to 'look in Bohn's, Number Five,'" she quoted, musingly, and then suddenly electrified with inspiration: "I know! In the fifth volume!"

She caught it up, beating a cloud of dust from its old covers. Her quick finger spun past the stiff pages, her eyes flashing from Stephen's attentive face to the yellowed print.

Into her lap there slipped a folded sheet of note-paper, as faded and discolored as the rest.

She took it in her fingers, and looked at Stephen in stupefaction.

"Now, I *don't* believe this!" she said, blankly. And she made no immediate effort to read it.

"But what *is* it?" he asked, as astonished as she was.

She held it out to him, her lips a little parted, her eyes wide, her expression almost terrified.

"You read it!" she whispered.

He opened it, a small sheet, half-covered with writing in a girl's fine hand, and in violet ink. At the top of the sheet was printed in colors a tiny straw basket, from which roses, lilies, and marguerites were spilling in a flood.

"*George dearest,*" Stephen read, "*I am so sorry. Uncle Harry will not let me keep them, but I appreciate them all the same. Dear George, I did not mean what I*

said in the rose arbor, and I will do anything you wish. I was anxious and sad about this horrible money question. Send me a note by Cynthia. Morgan does not come until Thursday. He is always kind to me, and I know he will understand. I am praying that God will guide me. I feel so young—though I am seventeen. I am so sorry that I hurt you!

Your

Grace."

The letter fluttered loose in Stephen's fingers. He and the woman opposite him sat silent, looking into each other's eyes. There was a glitter of tears upon her lashes.

"So that was it!" she said, trying to smile. "They quarreled, in the rose arbor, and he never got her note, to say that she was sorry!"

"How do you know he never got it?" Stephen asked, combatting a curious sensation that this was all a dream.

"Because he wouldn't have left it in this book!" she answered, animatedly. "She hid it there—sending back the books by Cynthia. And he never found it! And then Morgan came—my grandfather, of course, and she married him!"

"But she *should* have married my grandfather!" Stephen said, with a dazed sort of laugh.

"Evidently the women of my family——" But Mrs. Lombard did not finish her thought. "I'll show you how pretty she was!" she said. And again she left the room.

This time she returned with a daguerreotype-case of purple leather and gilded tin, opened against the smooth warm brownness of her palm. Stephen looked

upon a ringleted belle of the 'fifties, the cascades of her striped silk gown half-concealing the marble pedestal upon which she elegantly rested an elbow.

"That's Grace Delafield. Wasn't she lovely?"

"She was beautiful. I don't—" said Stephen, with an upward smiling glance—"I don't blame my grandfather!"

Mrs. Lombard sat down again, the picture and the planchette writing in her hands.

"No. But what do you make of it?" she asked, in simple wonder.

"I don't know!"

"It *couldn't* be coincidence?"

He looked through his glasses at the faded inscription, glanced at what she held, and shook his head.

"No. We have to dismiss that hypothesis!" he said.

"But then what *does* explain it!"

"By George," Stephen said, after a pause, "I don't *know* what to make of it!"

"It makes one believe in spirits," smiled Mrs. Lombard. "'I did not mean what I said—I am so sorry that I hurt you!'" she quoted, softly.

"You didn't hurt me!" Stephen said, quickly, in surprise.

"No, no; I'm reading the letter!" She looked up innocently, her eyes smiling, but at the sight of the odd expression on his face, her smile faded, and the warm color crept up under her creamy skin. For a long minute they looked at each other, unable to move their eyes.

"The thing has made me feel so queer," Stephen said, with an awkward little laugh, "that I don't know whether I'm my own grandfather, or what."

"After all," she mused, "it was only seventy Aprils ago! April——" She picked up the pencilled paper again. "Planchette said April," she reminded him. "Look here—'April second'. The day Allen died!"

"And the day we——" But Stephen did not finish his sentence as he had intended. "The day Fred and I came down here!" he substituted somewhat flatly. But she was musing over the page, and evidently did not share his scruples, for she said simply:

"The day we met each other. Stephen!" The name was a mere electric whisper, and he knew that she spoke it without realizing what she said. "Does—does this frighten you, a little?"

Close beside him, her amber eyes shining with their strange light, her smooth cheeks just faintly flushed, and her red lips parted, she seemed to him almost startlingly beautiful. That young flesh and blood, under a crown of massed amber hair, could so radiate warmth and fragrance and subtle scent, was strange to his well-ordered senses.

He saved himself with a reassuring laugh; no, there was nothing frightening about it. And immediately he got to his feet, only anxious to get out into the air, away from the spell of this woman's voice and beauty, this seductive hour of twilight and romance.

Hannah came in with the lamp; it seemed to him almost a desecration that the voice that had just been uttering these strange and sweet and marvellous things should quietly and sweetly address the maid, and to-night, when at the top of the stairs Mrs. Lombard sent her love "to Mimi," Stephen felt that the recipient rather than the sender was honored by the little message.

He looked up from the door, but she had turned back; it was like her calm poise, her indifference. Most women, Mimi, for instance, would have called good-byes after him until the actual closing of the door.

It was with a heart brimming with confused emotions that he walked briskly through the soft May dusk of the square. Children were still running and screaming, lights were pricking through the warm orange gloom, the last glow was still dying in the west.

Stephen got into his car, sat still a few moments, dreaming. Gas lights were rasping above the bookstalls now, a few young boys were lingering over the tables. Loudly talking laborers went by, homeward bound.

He drove about the rectangle of the square, to pass the rectory again, and looked up at the windows. A soft glow was shining there now, and as he looked up a shadow fluttered across it, and made his heart beat fast.

It would not do to have her glance out and see him. He turned toward Washington Street, and left the old square behind him. Speeding down the big main thoroughfare, he passed a clock; it had stopped. A few squares further was another clock, also stopped, and at the same hour of five minutes past seven.

A sudden uneasy suspicion dawned upon Stephen; could these clocks possibly be right? The evenings were growing bright now! With a little audible groan he raised his left wrist.

Good heavens! it was after seven o'clock. And he had promised Mimi to be early, to take her to a theatre dinner at the Jenkins'.

CHAPTER XIII

STEPHEN ran up his aunt's steps at ten minutes after the hour; they were all waiting for him. Mimi was with Grace and Fred; she looked a little anxious, but prettier for that, in her fairy-like green tulle, with her big fur coat over her arm. Mrs. Curran, uncomfortable in formal evening dress, looked at him in kindly exasperation, for the expected explanation, the Judge dropped his paper, and listened, from his big chair.

"Come on, explain why it took you two hours to tell pretty Mrs. Lombard that Aunt Bessy wanted her for luncheon!" Grace said, mischievously. Stephen had never liked Grace very well; she was a lean, rather colorless girl, with too much manner, and an absolute liking for unpleasantness. "We're all waiting—the Jenkins just telephoned, and Mimi is thinking of breaking her engagement!" added Grace, vivaciously.

Mimi merely laughed at this; she came over to Stephen, and put her hand on his shoulder, smiling up into his eyes with perfect confidence and affection.

"It isn't important at all!" she said, good-naturedly. "I know you couldn't help it!"

This did not seem to be the moment for any talk of George Curran and Grace Delafield; Stephen ignored Grace, and smiled comfortably at Mimi.

"I was detained," he said. "I'm awfully sorry! I'll rush up, and be dressed in five minutes——"

What he said mattered little to Mimi because she

loved him so. Everything was radiant and serene again, because Stephen was here.

"I think—there are so many of us, that we'd better go on without you," she said. There was no other reproach, and Mimi was so charming to Stephen tonight, so happy and confident, that he thought that he loved her better than he had ever done in his life.

But when she had loyally explained to Aunt Bessy, and to Mrs. Jenkins, and to sundry other interested persons, that the nature of Stephen's work was to keep him busy at all hours, and that a lawyer's wife always had that problem to meet, like a doctor's wife, he found that he could not quite simply enter upon the matter of "Bohn's Library" and the "Lives of the Queens," and the coincidence—to call it that, of the old scribblings of planchette. If Mimi or his aunt chanced to ask about Mrs. Lombard, he meant to recount the incident with great enthusiasm and spontaneity, but neither Mimi nor Mrs. Curran did.

On Friday evening he asked his aunt casually about her luncheon; had Mrs. Lombard come? Oh, yes; Mrs. Curran answered him unsuspectingly, she had had four ladies, it had been very nice. They had talked about—well, the Red Cross, and Mimi, of course. And Mrs. Porter had asked Mrs. Lombard if she ever had tried planchette again, but she had said no. And afterward they had gone out to Keystone Road to inspect the new house.

So she had deliberately concealed the book incident, Stephen thought, with a little contempt for such weakness. But immediately he remembered that he himself had probably given her her cue—by one of two shrewd questions she might swiftly have ascertained

that Mrs. Curran knew nothing of the matter, and have patterned her own policy upon his.

This duplicity was foreign to Stephen's idea of himself, and it troubled him, and made him a trifle resentful of Mrs. Lombard's influence on his life. He found himself constantly thinking of her, of ways to show her how entirely innocent he was of anything like a secret feeling for her, or a tacit understanding with her. To be concealing anything, with her, was to feel disloyal to Mimi.

A few days later, when Mimi had gone to a matinée with two or three of her friends, he drove down to Kingsgreen Square again, with no definite object in view. She might not be in, there might be other people there, he was not so much anxious to see her, as anxious to prove to himself that it was not important whether he saw her or not, and that there was nothing mysterious about her.

She was at home, and she was alone, and again, with a deep sense of utter content, Stephen sat down, and looked about the shabby pleasant room with satisfaction. There was nothing "period" here; it had a slightly more cleared look than he remembered, but it was always homely, comfortable, simple, even poor. It had distinction, it expressed not only a momentary and passing mood, but it held the past safely in its old chairs and pictures and bits of odd china.

Lucretia Lombard, too, partook of this same quality; the quality of a steadily moving stream that is unchanged by its environment, rather than divided into distracting pools and waterfalls. Her manner was quiet, her black gown simple, she listened rather than talked, and showed that she felt, in Stephen's

presence here, the same pleasure that he himself experienced.

The fragrant tea, the plain bread and butter, the marvellous voice and the watching, shining eyes; it was all what he had liked so much, and wanted so much.

And what harm, he asked himself, driving away at half-past five o'clock. What had they talked about? Books, and themselves—he wondered if he had dwelt too long upon the reminiscences of his boyhood into which he had somehow been beguiled—and she had told him seriously of a little French bakery where one could get *brioche* for fifteen cents—great big ones. He had said he was not quite sure what *brioche* was and she had answered with her friendly smile that he was eating a toasted *brioche* at that moment.

He was to meet Mimi and Marjorie and Sue at the International Hotel after the theatre, but they were late, having stopped to look at a salmon-pink smock, and Stephen was waiting alone at a table when they apologetically and laughingly arrived. Their excuses made him feel more secure than ever in his own integrity, and as he was driving them to an early bridge-dinner at the Country Club, he told Mimi, furred and eager beside him on the front seat, that he had seen Mrs. Lombard that afternoon.

"Stephen, weren't you nice to run in?" the girl approved, heartily. "How is she?"

But before he could answer, some nonsense from Ted, Marjorie, and Sue in the back seat caused a diversion, and Mimi twisted squarely about to hang over the back of the seat and join them in conversation.

Her indifference made him happy, and the evening was a success from every point of view. But from that

day there was a subtle change in Stephen. He did not define it to himself. He hardly realized, because his feeling toward Mrs. Lombard was so innocent, how often his thoughts were with her.

When he sat in her little sitting-room in the rectory, watching the amber head and the quickly moving white hands, he was entirely free from any sense of disloyalty to Mimi. The glow that always accompanied him when he went away sometimes warmed him through an entire abstracted, kindly evening; it was no sooner gone than he was planning to see Lucretia again. The telephone thrilled him, because once or twice she had telephoned him at his office. The mail he tossed aside disappointedly, if one of her stiff white envelopes was not there; yet when she wrote it was but a few words of thanks for flowers or books. The streets of Sanbridge, dingy in the first flood of summer heat and light, were brightened with the mere possibility that there might move through them, at any unexpected corner, the plain homespun black suit, the crisp transparent black veil, the clear eyes that always lighted so pleasantly when they met his.

Toward Mimi he was not conscious of a change of feeling. She had always been his confident, gay little sister, full of life and nonsense and little unexpected tendernesses; he had always been her affectionately interested and loyal admirer. He loved her still, was proud of her. He liked the dark head, and the glowing cheeks, the slender figure so smartly habited on horseback, or in blazing orange and white on the links. He liked to have this particular girl single herself out from the fluffy, laughing group of girls in yellow and green and pink, at a dance, and come smiling

toward him, shining slippers reflected in the shining floor, and a warm young hand to hold his while they talked together.

There was something eminently satisfactory about Mimi; she was in everything adequate, and in nothing extreme. She was, as the girls often told her, "a darling."

"Shall you miss me when I am up on the mountain, Steve?" she asked him, idly, one warm noontime in early June, when they were decorously walking home from church together. St. Gregory's was but a few squares away from the aristocratic part of Sanbridge, and the correct thing was to walk to church on Sunday morning. Mimi was enjoying this virtuous act especially to-day, because she was wearing a delightful blue swiss gown dotted finely in yellow, with a wide-brimmed French hat of the same material, upon which two exquisite yellow roses had been knowingly placed. Her silk stockings were blue, and her patent leather pumps shining like mirrors, and to complete the costume she carried a frivolous lace parasol with an amber-yellow bracelet in the handle.

To walk beside Stephen, to bow and nod to admiring friends, to feel the delicious warm air soft upon her face, and to know that the day stretched pleasantly before her through a vista of informal Sunday lunch, when Sue and Ted and Jerry Stover would drop in, to an afternoon at the club, or drifting about making calls, and a summer dinner in thin frocks at the Montgomerys', was enough to make Mimi's unspoiled heart soar like a bird.

They were going to see the new house after lunch, and that was a delight; there were always a dozen new details of ice-box, of towel-racks to discuss, new

joys in the way of cedar closets or ingeniously placed mirrors to discover, wonderful debates as to rugs and the placing of book-cases.

"Steve," said Mimi, contentedly, sauntering at his side, "shall you miss me when I go up to Red Pine Mountain?"

He looked at her indulgently.

"Oh, no, why should I? Dozens of girls left in town!" he answered, smiling.

"You'll be up every week-end," Mimi said, pleased. "And then two weeks' vacation in August? And then we all come down—and then—*plans!*"

"And you'll be having dressmakers and caterers and presents, I suppose," Stephen observed, "and everything will be in one grand scramble!"

"Ah, but I love that scramble!" Mimi, whose eyes were dancing at the picture, answered, gaily. "The gowns—bridesmaids and all that, and Aunt Bessy talking to Bernardi about the supper, and I think to Treat, too, about announcements and that! And, Steve, I shall have to have cards—it did thrill me so to remember that! Mrs. John Stephen Winship——! Of course it *will* be a scramble," she confessed, contentedly, "but I intend to rest and sleep late and just loaf all summer—except when you're there, of course——"

"This is June," he mused. "You go up July first?"

"July second—a week from Monday. Aunt Bessy is taking Lizzie, and old Matea is there. Mrs. Jenkins and Sue will be up later, and Fred, of course—Steve," Mimi was suddenly diverted, "is Fred all right?"

The dreamy, pleased expression of his face altered instantly into concern.

"How do you mean all right?" he asked, sharply.

"He seems—worried," Mimi hesitated. "I don't *know*—but I think he tried to borrow money last week," she added, with a cautious glance and in a lowered tone.

"Who said so?"

"Why, no one actually said so. But Belle Newell was in the Bank the other day, waiting for Roy, and she heard somebody say something about advising someone not to consider it—men's voices back of the partition, you know—and then she heard Fred saying, quite loud, 'Don't you worry, Jim, if I need money I can always get it!' And she supposed the 'Jim' was Jimmy Unger, he's one of the vice-presidents, now——"

"That wasn't Fred, though!" Stephen said, dismissing a troubled frown, and in a confident tone.

"Oh, yes, it *was*, Steve, for he came out, and walked with her and the baby across to the Tiffin Shop."

"Fred would speak to me, if anything had come up——" But Stephen was uneasy, and showed it.

"Does he—could it be gambling debts, Steve?"

"Lord, no, those boys don't play very high. No, I'm sure not——" He mused, and Mimi sent him more than one sympathetic and sorry glance. "What the deuce could that have been, now?" he said.

"I'm sorry I told you!" Mimi exclaimed, impulsively.

"Oh, no—no, I'm glad you did! I wonder where Fred is to-day. I ought to get hold of him right away."

"Steve, he's such a worry to you!" the girl said, regretfully.

"But the sort of worry you love!" Stephen answered, with his good, serious smile. Mimi felt the salt in her eyes.

"I wonder if you are going to be as good a husband as you are a brother, Steve?" she asked, with a light pressure of her white-gloved hand on his arm.

"I am not anything like as good a brother as I hope to be a husband, my dear!" he answered, soberly, with a look that made Mimi feel happy all day. He *did* love her—there was nothing that he could give that was not hers, the girl told herself eagerly.

They would be married in the early winter, only a few months away now. And yet she found herself incessantly analyzing and watching, hoping and fearing. Did Stephen really love her? After marriage, when they had come back from New York and Atlantic City and Point Comfort, when they were settled among the flowery walls and polished floors of the beautiful home, then all this unrest and doubt would cease, Mimi told herself. Then she would be his wife—she knew what Stephen's loyalty was. But now—his attitude toward this engagement almost partook disquietingly of their old relationship of ward and guardian; he stirred her to the very deeps of her being, but she could not rouse in him anything more than the old affection and admiration and kindly interest.

Sometimes Mimi despised herself for the constant uneasiness of her heart and for the cowardice that made it impossible for her to put the problem frankly before Stephen. And sometimes she solaced herself with a comforting yet heart-breaking resolution to break the engagement—or at least to tell Stephen she thought they had better break it, until they were more sure——

At this point he must catch her in his arms, and flood her hungry soul with protest and denial——

But suppose he agreed to a delay of the wedding, admitted that he had spoken too hastily?

No; coward that she was, she couldn't risk that. She dared not try that! Stephen was her world; she could not face life without him, especially after these intoxicating weeks when he had claimed her before them all!

And it was nonsense to cloud this lovely time with such hysterical suspicions. With the house growing daily in beauty, and only the mountain summer between her and her new estate, how foolish—how *wrong* —it was to fret herself with these absurdities!

CHAPTER XIV

Mimi went down, on a humid June day of heavy fog, to say good-bye to Mrs. Lombard. Her hostess was just in from a walk; tea was served to an accompaniment of muffled horns from the river, and muffled motor-horns from Kingsgreen Square. Hannah was out; Mimi admired the ease with which the little ceremony was conducted.

"Tell me about the cabin at Red Pine," Lucretia said, stirring her own cup, and eyeing her guest with satisfaction.

Mimi, very pretty in a striped skirt and soft silk blouse, with a plain hat pushed down over her dark hair, described it animatedly. It was just as rough as it could be, of course—real mountains, there had been bears and wildcats there only a few years ago. But the cabin—or cabins, were comfortable, with big screened porches, and showers, and then of course there was fruit, and the lake, and the big woods, and moonrises, and sunsets——

"We all love it!" confessed Mimi. "We've been going up there since I was a little girl. Aunt Bessy and Uncle Sam and I have one cabin, and the Jenkins have one, and the Rutgers. We take the motor-cars, —you can drive down to Warren's Mills—my grandfather's old mills—in twenty minutes, and that's only six miles from Farley's. You'd—" she amended the phrase—"you *will* love it," she smiled. "I do

wish you could come up for a few nights! Could it be managed? The best train leaves here at three, and gets to Farley's about five—or sometimes we motor all the way, in about three hours."

"It sounds charming!" said Lucretia Lombard, slowly.

"Well, then, shall we set a date now?"

"But I am going to New York for a fortnight," said the older woman, "and I am not quite sure when that will be. Sladski, the English pianist, and his wife—old friends of mine—are coming down from Canada to make arrangements for some winter concerts, and they are anxious to have me meet them there, and guide them about a bit. His real name is Slade—Mr. Lombard and I were in the same *pension* with them, years ago, when he was starving and working and struggling—but he is very successful now."

"But when you come back?" Mimi urged.

Before she answered, the other woman looked at her thoughtfully; there was a faint cloud on the lovely vivid face.

"I would love it," she said, constrainedly. And almost immediately she rose, and walked to the window.

Mimi's eyes followed her with surprise and sympathy. She supposed that she had touched some sensitive chord, had hurt the lovely Mrs. Lombard quite innocently.

Her hostess remained at the casement, looking out between the plain net hangings into fog-shrouded Kingsgreen Square. Her figure, even in this setting, had a suggestion of stateliness, there was something romantic, something essentially feminine, in the plain gown that showed the beautiful curves of breast and

arm so distinctly, the drooping, gold-brown head, the shapely ringed hand resting lightly against the pane.

After a moment Lucretia rejoined her, showing her usual quiet manner; the summer visit was promised and she went to the head of the stairs with Mimi, and lingered there, clinging to the girl's hand as if she hated to have her go.

Mimi nodded and smiled up at her, closed the door, and turned into the brooding mist and fog. The air was warm and heavy with moisture, trees dripped softly and silently in the dim afternoon light, toward the west a smouldering yellow-gray brightness in the low, smothering sky showed where the struggling sun was hidden. There was a hot-house sweetness from the elms, from the damp earth of the park.

Mimi got into her car, busied herself with brake and gears, and touched her starter absentmindedly. Her thoughts were pleasantly filled with the next call—she must go see old Cousin Mary Dolliver.

Another car turned into Kingsgreen Square, circled on the cobbles, and stopped only fifty feet behind her. Mimi, starting, glanced at it, moved on her way, her heart dancing with sudden excitement, paused at the corner and looked back at it again.

There was no mistake; it was Stephen's car, and the man who got out of it, and ran up Mrs. Lombard's steps, was Stephen. It was delicious—it was a thing that happened so rarely!—this unexpected meeting with the most important person in the world. Once they had met just outside the Woman's Exchange, and Mimi had liked the Woman's Exchange ever since! And once when she was lunching with Belle Newell

at the hotel, Stephen and Roy Newell had come across the restaurant to join them.

She would have met him at the dinner table to-night; but it was wonderful to anticipate that meeting by an hour or two. Mimi wheeled her car about, and stopped it with its fender almost touching the fender of his own car.

Twice she rang the bell; there was no answer. Mimi was puzzled; Hannah she knew was out, but there was surely no possibility that they could not hear. Perhaps it did not ring! she thought, only to remember that she had rung it herself a short hour ago.

She tried the door; it was open, and she went dimpling and smiling up the brief flight.

Stephen had opened that door for himself only five minutes before, and had mounted the stairs with a heart beating with as much pleasure and expectation as Mimi's own. Lucretia rose from her chair as he came to the door of the sitting-room, and they met as they often did, in silence; she raised one of his hands between both her own, and they stood close together, smiling with mysterious joy into each other's eyes.

"You've had tea?" Stephen said, glancing at the tray.

"I thought"—It was always wonderful to him, this first sound of her voice—"I thought you had gone to Albany?"

"I go to-morrow. I'd forgotten that to-day there was a special meeting of the aldermen—I had to be there. And when it was over—ten minutes ago—I began to think about—*tea!*"

"You shall have it," she promised, in a tone suddenly troubled and thoughtful. "Mimi has just been here."

"Mimi!" he echoed.

"To say good-bye. She was here not five minutes ago!"

"I saw a car turning out of the square," he remembered.

"But did she see you?" Mrs. Lombard asked, quickly.

"Oh, no—she would have stopped!" the man said, confidently.

Lucretia had remained standing, now he looked tentatively at a chair.

"No," she said, shaking her head, "I think you'd better not stay, I think you'd better follow Mimi, and tell her you were looking for her. Perhaps—you and I —had better go no further, Stephen."

There was a pause, while he looked at her seriously.

"Further in what?" he asked, briefly and grimly.

"In our friendship," Lucretia answered, simply.

"Mimi knows that I come to see you—asks me to!" Stephen said.

"But she doesn't know——" Lucretia was silent, studied his face for a moment with anxious eyes, and looked down. "She doesn't know just how much it means to me, to have you come!" she began again.

Stephen was astonished to feel his heart begin to beat rapidly, with an unreasoning pleasure and excitement.

"Do you see?" she asked, with a sort of resolute sternness.

"I suppose I see what you mean," he was beginning, confusedly, when the bell rang. "Who is that?" he asked.

"I don't know!" Lucretia said, after a second of attention. "Let him ring. Hannah is not here!"

"Might it be Fred?" Stephen knew that his brother sometimes came to see Lucretia, and was a little curious about their friendship.

"Fred," she answered, casually, "would not ring!"

And still standing, she resumed: "You are engaged to Mimi, Stephen, going to be married in a few months! Is it fair to her——"

"But Mimi knows that I will still have women friends!" he said, in amazement, almost in anger. "What harm do you and I do when we have a cup of tea together! Surely—surely you are exaggerating——"

The bell rang again. Lucretia looked puzzled.

"I can't think who that can be! Perhaps Hannah is back, I'll see if she will answer it," she said. She met Mimi at the top of the stairs. "Oh, I'm *glad* you came back," Stephen heard her say, composedly, "for I had not asked you where you were going, and didn't know how to send him after you!"

A little confused, Stephen greeted his promised wife; more tea was declined; for a few minutes the three stood chatting together.

"I knew Stephen was looking for me!" Mimi said, laughing at him. "But who told you I was here, Steve? Aunt Bessy?"

"And what a close call—another minute and you would have been gone!" Lucretia interposed, adroitly. Stephen felt a sensation of love and loyalty toward little innocent Mimi, almost a surprise at his own sense of shame—that circumstances so innocent in themselves could seem to shut her out of his frankest confidence. He went home with her a few minutes later full of devotion and attention toward her, and nursing a stern determination not to call at the rectory again for months. While it had all been just a frank, enjoyable friendship he had been delighted to drop in there now and then, but this aspect of secrecy and deceit and tragedy must be checked in the very beginning.

CHAPTER XV

THERE was a dinner and bridge-party at the Stovers' in honor of an elderly, visiting French surgeon, on the night before Mimi and the Currans left for the mountains. The hot weather made the affair informal, the men wore white, and almost all the girls were in simple white as well. Stephen arrived late, and had slipped into his seat beside Mimi at the table before he chanced to hear the deep voice he knew so well, and looked up to see Lucretia Lombard opposite him, slowly waving a plumy black fan, and talking to young Doctor Bert Lucas, on her left, who was quite obviously absorbed. On her right was the guest of honor, whom she had known, it appeared, in France.

She wore delicate black lace; he had never seen the creamy-brown arms and throat bare before to-night; against her warm skin the famous pearls gleamed with rosy lustre; her crown of amber-brown hair glinted in the soft candle-light. Among the white-clad girls, with their foamy frills and delicate ribbons, she was exotic and brilliant; Mimi on one side of him, and Marjorie Rutger on the other, both murmured in his ear, in the modern generous fashion, that Mrs. Lombard was perfectly stunning, wasn't she beautiful to-night, everyone said that she was simply gorgeous!

She met Stephen's smiling greeting with dignity, and only the quick flicker of a smile, and turned to the man beside her again. Stephen felt an odd pang.

"She met Stephen's smiling greeting with dignity, and only the quick flicker of a smile"

What was wrong? She had never been so brief with him before.

After dinner he tried to manage a word alone with her, if only to show her how innocent and casual his feeling was, but she evaded him deliberately. She was not going to stay for cards; it was already ten o'clock—thank you, but Fred was driving her home. Stephen could only listen, vaguely hurt, as he heard her make an appointment with the old surgeon for tea-time the next day; she had some books she must show him, they must have a talk, she said, warmly. He did not quite dare ask if he might come, too.

She had been, in a sense, his protegée for a long time. Now other people were being nice to her, were they? The Rutgers, and the Montgomerys, and Aunt Bessy! Confusedly, he resented their patronage. And even while he bid, and played, and made the cards, he was thinking, with a little soreness, of her breezy indifference to him to-night. Why, he had been—she had said it herself—her truest friend!

A few minutes after she left, old Doctor Mineau also went away; Stephen could have laughed at himself for the fleeting, wretched suspicion that the surgeon was going down to Kingsgreen Square—she might give him coffee, he would have the deep chair Stephen usually took, they would talk. He seemed to see Lucretia, in her black lace, leaning back in her chair, locking those beautiful white hands in a fashion, infinitely reposeful, that she had, and watching her guest with her appreciative, shining amber eyes.

Fred did not come back, either. Funny thing, if Fred was sharing that felicitous hour in Lucretia's sitting-room—she had said that "Fred would not ring"——

"Give him time!" he heard Mimi say, amusedly. "Is it so hard, Steve?"

The room swam into place about him: Mrs. Stover's big pleasant room, with the windows wide open on the brick terrace, and the awnings outside beginning to flap in the blessed breeze that was following a burning day. The lights settled into place, and he saw the bare shoulders and ruffled gowns, the card-tables, Grace looking at him in patient exasperation, Mimi blinking her gipsy eyes.

"Stevie, were you going to sleep?"

"No—I beg everybody's pardon! Are you all waiting for me? Let's see—you bid four hearts, Tom. I think we'll double that, Mimi, just to show these people that we are not pikers!"

"Content!" sang Mimi. And as she reviewed her cards with a quick little spreading movement of her fingers, the big diamond that had been Stephen's mother's winked in the light.

He took her home at midnight, and instead of driving the car to the garage, made a swift run down to Kingsgreen Square, and looked up at the rectory windows.

A dim light was still burning in the sitting-room upstairs.

The next morning began for Stephen a time of wretched perplexity and uncertainty. His thoughts were filled with Lucretia; everything in life that did not concern her was blotted out of his consciousness. He followed her throughout her day—now she was marketing, now writing, now talking to Hannah over her lonely lunch. Flower shops suggested to Stephen only a dozen charming fashions in which he might send her flowers, his quieter moments were filled with long

imaginary conversations in which he and she discussed everything that interested him. A passing woman in the street, whose carriage or whose hair even vaguely suggested her, brought Stephen's heart to fever-beat.

He went to tea, and she was exactly as charming and simple, and lovely to look upon, as he had remembered her. She was going to the Gunther House, not very far from Farley's, for July and August, and she hoped to see Mimi at the cabin on Red Pine Mountain some day. She rode horseback a great deal, she said. Stephen loved the serenity with which she lived her life, apparently indifferent to money—it was so unlike the usual feminine protesting and complaining.

A day or two later Hannah told him that Mrs. Lombard had gone to New York, to be gone ten days, or two weeks. The sitting-room was shaded, and in perfect order; there were no roses on the closed piano, no books huddled on the floor beside her chair.

He walked away into a blankly empty and glaring city that was sweating in the dirty heat of the square, gritty and moist. Life was empty before him; it was half-past four. He did not know how he was to get through the hours until dinner at the club; to-morrow was a dreary waste—all the to-morrows! Books were but printed words, flowers useless, and the voices of other men only a degree less irritating than those of the women he met.

Hannah had said that Mrs. Lombard would be back upon a certain Thursday morning, and had planned to leave for the mountains on Friday. Obviously, then, the time to see her was upon Thursday afternoon.

Stephen lived for that time; was conscious that all his heart and soul had centred upon it. He did not

analyze the feeling, but he moved steadily toward the hour when he would see Lucretia again.

The day came, wore itself slowly away to blazing mid-afternoon—two o'clock, three o'clock. At four Stephen stopped his car at the rectory, with a fast-beating heart.

The door was wide open, but he rang. He heard Hannah say: "Maybe that's the man for your trunks!"

A moment later he was in the sitting-room doorway, and Lucretia said "Stephen!"

A trunk was open in the room, and small articles in general had been neatly stacked on mantel and tables. The curtains had been taken down; a summer wind ballooned the new Italian blinds she had hung; there was a light, like sunshine through deep water, quivering on the walls.

Lucretia wore a wide-sleeved dimity garment over a lacy petticoat, and was quite frankly in negligee. Her hair was most scrupulously dressed, and her feet charming in white stockings and low shoes. There was a narrow satin ribbon threaded through the delicate laces of the petticoat, and another ribbon, of the same faint pink, in a tumbled knot at her breast, held the loose dotted garment together. The sight of the feminine daintiness, in this breezy, darkened room, went to Stephen's head like a quick wine.

On her laughing, confused face the strange glimmering light shone like a golden glow; she made a little protesting exclamation, and then gave him her hand across the open trunk. Taken unawares, she was still not in the least at a loss, and despatched Hannah for something cool to drink, promising him that she would change her dress and join him in exactly three minutes.

As she passed him, Stephen quite simply took her into his arms, and after an instant's quick stiffening of her muscles, and a frightened upward look from her amber eyes, she suddenly grew limp and quiet, her weight resting lightly against him, her heart beating hard against his.

He kissed her blindly: the drooped head, the smooth forehead, the bare warm neck. And after a dizzy moment she raised her face, and he had his lips against her own.

One flame ran through them both, melting them together in a blaze of feeling that swept away all judgment, all consciousness of their surroundings. Stephen bent over her, his hands hurting her shoulders where they gripped her; she shut her eyes, her head fallen back with closed eyes.

"My God!" he whispered, over and over again, "how I have missed you—how I have missed you!"

"Yes, I know——!" she answered, blindly, and in a whisper. And she freed herself, and stood away from him, still clinging tightly to one of his hands, and breathing hard. "I know—but wait a moment!"

He made a motion to take her in his arms again, but again she whispered, "Wait a moment!" and they stood still.

"What are we doing?" Lucretia said, presently, in a slow, bewildered voice. She went quietly and coldly to her chair, and dropped into it, all the flame and passion burned out of her.

Stephen, silent and aghast, stood at the mantel, looking down at her with sombre eyes. The hot summer wind ballooned at the dropped blinds, the clocks struck the half-hour. Outside, in the heat, a group

of children went by, with a chipping sound of feet and the chatter of high voices.

Hannah came in, with clinking glasses on a tray; the expressman was at the door; Lucretia escaped into her bedroom, and Stephen gravely conducted the little business of the trunk.

When she came back, it was wearing the plain white linen she affected in hot weather; a linen as transparent and fine as a handkerchief, with no ornament unless the deep hem and the little line of pearl buttons at the slender wrist were ornaments. Stephen saw that she was pale, and that her manner was troubled and nervous; she sat down, after a glance at the closed door that led to Hannah's region, and linked her hands together in her lap, and looked down at them while she spoke.

"I am sorry that happened, Stephen—I *know* you are! I wish that we had foreseen it—but of course one doesn't think! One doesn't think."

She raised the knotted fingers to her lips for a moment, stared blankly across them into space.

"I blame myself," she added, talking at random, her eyes averted. "You and I must not run the risk in future——"

"What risk?" Stephen said, harshly, in the silence into which her voice sank a little drearily.

"The risk of seeing too much of each other. The risk of hurting Mimi——"

"You do not suppose that I could marry Mimi *now*, Lucretia, loving you?" Stephen asked, almost sternly.

Her face grew white.

"You are engaged to Mimi!" she whispered.

For answer he took the little distance between them in three quick steps, and knelt down beside her chair,

and put his arms about her slender, fragrant, white-clad figure, feeling every fibre of his being respond to the ecstasy of holding her youth and beauty at last in his arms.

"You don't think I could do that, Lucretia?" he asked, seriously.

The amber eyes were shining close to his own, she had laid one warm brown hand against his shoulder, the thin, full white skirt billowed against him.

And suddenly, as if what she read in his sober face satisfied her, he saw her smile, a radiant, wonderful smile, the first of its kind that he had ever seen upon her face. Close upon it came a mist of tears, her lips trembled, even while her marvellous eyes were laughing.

Again they kissed each other, but this time there was no fire; it was a girl's trusting, ardent kiss that she gave him, and after it she rested her shining head contentedly against his shoulder, as he knelt, tightening his arm about her, and they remained so for a long, long time.

"You love me?" Stephen said, for the hundredth time. She moved her dreaming eyes slowly to his, dropped her head on his shoulder again.

"I do love you," she answered, in her velvet voice.

The inexpressible joy of hearing it made quiet no longer possible to him. He straightened up, and framed her face in his hands, and in his excitement and exultation could have shouted and danced like a boy. She herself seemed such a miracle to him, that she had cast a miraculous glow even upon himself, and the homeliest and dullest moment of his life.

To have this glowing radiant woman, this woman that all men admired, who might have drawn any

one in the world to her feet, sitting here in the curve of his arm, her spreading white ruffles and slender white ankles, golden-brown masses of hair and golden-brown eyes, all confessedly his—all a part of the love she admittedly gave him in return for his adoration, was to have the most blinding, dazing, thrilling emotion of his life.

"But Lucretia—when did it begin?"

"Oh, I don't know! I don't think I ever really faced it until to-day! I didn't *want* you to like me, you know!"

"Then God help the man you *do* want, that's all!"

"I knew you *liked* me, Steve, I don't mean that! But—what is it?"

"Nothing. Go on. I didn't say anything!"

"No; but you laughed—a little."

"Lucretia, you mustn't look at me that way! It distracts me."

"Yes, but why did you laugh?"

"Because I love so to have you call me Steve, my darling!"

An interval of murmuring. Then Lucretia said:

"We do not get very far in this conversation!"

"Because I am too happy to think. I can't believe it yet—that you see anything to care for in me!"

"Other women have!" she teased him. But the smile quickly faded; the words evoked the thought of Mimi. "Stephen, what of Mimi?" she asked.

His face darkened as hers had done, but he answered readily:

"I am sorry about Mimi—she is a dear, generous girl, and I suppose the natural thing was to fall in love with her guardian——"

"Oh, no, Steve, it was not that!" the woman protested, quickly.

"No, perhaps not. Poor Mimi! I am sorry! I am extremely sorry. I wish—a few months ago——

"But there is no use of thinking of that now," he interrupted himself, sensibly. "The problem is what to do *now*. It would be monstrous to marry Mimi—in fact, it would be impossible! So the only question is how to tell Mimi, and when."

She was watching him expectantly.

"No date is set for your marriage?"

"Early winter."

"Early winter. I am glad it was not set. I am sorry," said Lucretia, with sudden pain in her voice, "bitterly sorry, for the whole thing! Let us be sensible for a moment. Could we—could we go back, and be as if this had never been?"

"No; we could not," he said, definitely.

"Stephen, think. She loves you, and she trusts you, and everyone is so delighted with——"

"Don't talk nonsense!"

Lucretia was conscious of loving his reproof, loving his very anger.

"Is it nonsense?" she persisted. "You are thirty, I am twenty-eight. We have known what hardship and self-denial are—we could steel ourselves to bear it. I could go away!"

"You are talking to hear yourself talk," Stephen said. "If you died to-morrow, which God forbid, I would never look at another woman in all my life!"

Her exultant laugh answered him; she linked her arms about his neck, and they kissed each other.

"It has happened before, a broken engagement,"

Stephen said, presently. "One thinks nothing at all of it in someone else. I shall see Mimi this week-end —Marjorie is up in the mountains with her, they will talk it all over, but by the time she comes back to town, it will be an old story!"

"Stephen, it will go deeper than that!"

"It will not go so deep as an unhappy marriage, Lucretia."

"No-o," she hesitated. "But the—the new house, and everything!" she mused, her cheek still touching his, but her troubled eyes looking into space.

"Sweetheart, isn't it infinitely less tragic than to have her find out, after we were married, that you were in the world?"

"You know, you must let the world think that Mimi broke the engagement," Lucretia suggested, after a dreaming interval.

"Certainly. I thought of that!"

"And, Stephen—after all, Allen has been dead only five months! We must keep the whole thing a secret until after the New Year, at least."

"Inasmuch as I met you the very night he died, I feel my conscience perfectly clear on that score!" he answered, kissing the creamy brown forehead just where the wave of bright hair sprang richly and firmly upward toward the tawny coil.

"If you had loved Mimi more than me," Lucretia said, thoughtfully, "I could have done nothing," she smiled, "but cry myself to sleep, and try to reconcile myself to the thought that life and happiness and love were not coming my way! Instead, Mimi must do that, poor Mimi!"

"Did you ever cry yourself to sleep, Lucretia?"

"Oh, have I not? A hundred times!" She was resting quietly against him again; she told him of her childhood, of the erratic, unreasonable mother who ran away from family surveillance and home responsibilities, of drifting through French seaside resorts and Italian *pensions*, of Scotland in murky winters, and of a thousand financial makeshifts and subterfuges.

She brought him some photographs of little Lucretia Bannister, a sober handsome child in the pleats and lace collars of the juvenile 'nineties, with a leonine splendid head of fair hair, an older Lucretia in her first long frock and a colossal hat, balancing a parasol upon English sands, and a third of young Lady Lombard, sternly beautiful in low-cut satin, with her betrayed girl's eyes looking grave above the circle of pearls about her throat.

And Stephen's happiness, as with her own strange mixture of simplicity and reserve she admitted him into her confidences, was the most poignant he had ever known. The dismantled room was paradise, the burning summer afternoon sent drifts of immortal perfume through the opened windows.

After awhile they went to market, and that was ecstasy, too. And then Hannah gave them iced coffee and chops and a salad, and still the enchantment lasted and deepened, until every glance of the topaz eyes, and every turn of the slender wrist in the fine linen and tiny pearl buttons, was magic.

Stephen was expected at an important meeting at nine; she made him go. They were at table, they had not yet needed lights.

"Why, that would be a splendid beginning of our —our friendship," she reproached him, "to have

you missing your appointments, and slighting your work!" She hesitated, her hand on his shoulder. "Stephen, if—if the next few months are what we have been planning, if Mimi frees you, and the first buzzing about the matter dies down," she said, slowly, "mightn't we perhaps go away from Sanbridge—begin somewhere else?"

"Anywhere!" he answered contentedly.

"You could move your work?" she asked.

"Anywhere!" he said again. "If there was reason," he added, with a faintly surprised air.

"I was thinking," she pursued, "that people will blame us—Mimi is a great favorite, you know, and everybody knew her people here. It may hurt you politically, Steve. They talk of you for Senator, don't they?"

"They talk of a hundred men for Senator, as far as that goes!" he answered, indifferently, his ardent eyes only for her nearness and her beauty. "What makes you think your charms wouldn't appeal to a constituency as quickly as Mimi's?"

"Oh, it wasn't that!" She was thinking of the Warren fortune, as to his secret shame he was thinking, too. The first feeling of real hostility that he had ever felt toward Mimi assailed him now, driving to his meeting, and assuring his thoughts that no woman's money—and no woman's house—would help him with his career.

The thought of the beauty, the brilliance, and the charm of the woman who would help him warmed his pulses. He was to have breakfast with her at nine o'clock, and to be with her every minute of the time until her train left at eleven o'clock for Farley's.

CHAPTER XVI

LATE at night Fred joined Stephen in his room in the almost deserted Curran mansion; the brothers had opened their big uncurtained windows into the rustling maple leaves, a hot breeze was moving, and far to the north the play of electric flashes and the sullen hammering of thunder promised a long-awaited break in the weather.

Fred, his thin silk shirt sticking to his splendid big body with perspiration, and his dark crest of hair disordered, lay rather than sat in a wicker chaise-longue, cigarette-smoke circling up from his languidly drooped long hand. Stephen sat on the broad window ledge, also smoking, and looking down through the foliage where the street lights picked it out in golden relief, with a dreaming, ecstatic expression in his keen gray eyes. Near to each brother was a tall glass half filled with liquid and ice; Stephen had a temperate liking for iced tea at the close of a long hot day; Fred had strengthened his plain ginger ale with a little of the Judge's treasured rye.

"Saw Mrs. Lombard to-night!" Fred yawned. "I ran in there about nine o'clock—that old French geezer was there, Doctor Mineau. He wants her to translate a book of poems he has written; wouldn't you know an old fellow like that would write poetry!"

Stephen came back from his moonlighted tree-tops as if by electric shock. The very mention of Lucretia

—*his* Lucretia—thrilled him with exquisite and poignant emotion.

Jealousy of Fred and Doctor Mineau seized him; delicious and absurd jealousy. They had heard the fruit-like voice, watched the young splendid figure in the full, transparent white, looked into the eyes with their delicate gleam and shine of topaz.

"I was there to-day," he said, with a little conscious clearing of his throat.

"She said you were! She's a beauty, isn't she, Steve?"

The arc of Stephen's cigarette flew through the outer darkness.

"Yes. She's beautiful," he answered briefly.

"Goes to Farley's to-morrow," Fred pursued, after a long drink. "I thought some day, when we're at Red Pine Mountain, we might all drive over there, and see her!"

Stephen did not answer; mention of the cabin made him think of Mimi.

"She's fascinating, in a way, Lucretia Lombard is," Fred mused. "I'll bet she'll have a lot of attention, now that's she's free. Funny thing, the way that old fellow Lombard got out from under!"

"You—you don't admire her, I suppose, Fred?" Stephen asked, a little awkwardly.

"I like her. Sure, I think she's a pippin," Fred answered, without enthusiasm. "She's interesting—did she ever show you those pictures of Scotland—when they were there? She used to wear an awfully cute-looking outfit, in some dance or bazaar they had. And she has a kid picture of herself in one of those big hats the girls used to wear about ten years ago——!"

The pang of jealousy that Stephen felt now had nothing absurd or delicious in it; it was sharp pain, an agony of hurt and shame. He had supposed himself the privileged one, to see these glimpses of the old Lucretia. But it appeared that even Fred, who casually denied anything like real admiration for her, had had the same honor. And probably a thousand more, Stephen said to himself with a sick heart.

His old suspicion of her came back; she was one of those golden-headed enchantresses who bewitched all men into ridiculous and undignified extremes. This very evening, after that most marvellous and electrified afternoon, she had been laughing and talking with two other men——!

"If I could afford it, I'd marry Marjorie," Fred said, yawning.

"What—I beg pardon, but what did you say?" Stephen came out of a bitter musing, aware that his brother had spoken.

"Said that Marjorie is my choice—if Bert Lucas doesn't get her!"

"You could afford to marry, Fred," Stephen offered, slowly. He was longing for Fred's sympathy. Perhaps, if Fred was in love, he might more freely claim it.

Suddenly he remembered Mimi's hint that Fred had been trying to borrow money, and he wondered if the thought of marriage had been a possible spur.

"Marjorie will have something," he suggested, a little differently.

"I don't want to marry any one!" Fred said, lazily. Yet he was scowling, and Stephen knew that he had somehow missed his confidence.

He was hardly conscious of the fact that presently

Fred turned in. At about two o'clock he roused himself from his window-sill revery and went to bed in a sort of waking dream. The thunderstorm was nearer, the air insufferably thick and warm, the window curtains streamed suddenly into the room.

Stephen had to get up, to lower sashes all over the upper floor. The first spatter of big warm drops found him still wide-awake. Through the hour when wind and rain raged over the old house, and over the city, he lay wakeful, listening to the splitting crackle of the thunder, blinking when the blue lightning made the whole room tip and stagger.

It was over. He could open the windows again, breathe deep of the rain-washed, trembling air, look out upon the beaten tops of the elms far toward the south, where mutinous muttering and glimmering showed the track of the storm. He thought of Kingsgreen Square, and of Lucretia lying asleep, in this heavenly rush of coolness and sweetness, with her tawny hair braided, and her dreams all for him.

The clock in the city hall chimed three. Stephen said to himself that in only six hours—swift hours, happily—he would see her again!

CHAPTER XVII

STEPHEN and Lucretia breakfasted together, he helped her with last duties, admitted this morning into the bare, white, conventual bedroom that was dismantled for the summer. Lucretia, charming in a white linen suit and a small white hat, directed and helped him. She was businesslike about keys, about arrangements for telephone and milkman and paper-boy. But he felt all the time that their newly confessed feeling for each other trembled behind the mask of efficiency and composure. She was as conscious of him as he of her, her averted eyes, and the little unmanageable shake in her voice betrayed her over and over again.

They walked in Kingsgreen Square, and it was irradiated with the light that never was on land or sea. Stephen bought her daisies and magazines; it was wonderful to him to have charge of her light coat and her hand-bag. He saw her into the chair-car, pulled a shade, packed her impedimenta away in a rack, and left her in the reflected shine of the big shady window, smiling him a grateful good-bye.

And immediately it occurred to him that he might as well go to Farley's with her; Farley's was on the way to Red Pine Mountain, and he was expected by Mimi and his aunt on Saturday—the next day.

It was only a matter of five minutes of telephoning, before he came back again into the pleasantly shaded chair-car, and established himself in the chair next

to her own. The sense of surprise and adventure kept them smiling while the train drew through the hot, cluttered streets of the poorer districts, out between factories and warehouses, and so to suburban houses with gardens, and corner groceries on unpaved streets.

Together they watched all this change to real country green, together lunched at a little white table in the dining-car as it moved under the shadow of the big mountains. And there seemed to be no end and no beginning to the talk that rose up like a bubbling spring, flowing on and on through the magic two hours that seemed less than one.

At Farley's they had fifteen minutes for good-byes in the stream of afternoon sunshine that poured over the mountain. The air, after the heat of the train, was deliciously fresh and pungent; Lucretia's face, a little pale and jaded, regained its mysterious tawny bloom again, and she breathed deep breaths of the heavenly forest sweetness.

Stephen put her luggage into the white surrey marked "Gunther's," longing to go with her to the old-fashioned house that was three or four miles up in the hills, longing for the right to be alone with her, away from all other eyes, free to wander in the meadows and climb up through the pines, fishing, swimming, sharing the country meals of old Ma Gunther's famous table, talking, talking, talking.

"When do I see you again, Steve?"

"I'll write—I'll manage it!"

"You'll have your talk with Mimi first?"

His face grew grave.

"Immediately!"

"Can you believe that we found this out only yesterday, Steve?"

"I think I knew it always," he answered, "since George and Grace had their quarrel in the rose arbor!"

She seemed to take the light of the day with her; he got back into the train, for the six-mile run to Warren's Mills, with a dreary sense that life was dull and stale. There was nothing ahead, until the next meeting with her, and he could not foresee it clearly.

He picked up a magazine, glanced at the empty chair where she had sat so recently, and sighed with utter distaste. When she was with him, when he could watch the movement of her lips, the clean, firm line of chin, the shining eyes under her bright hair, everything seemed simple and easy. But now that he was alone, he began to wonder how he could begin his talk with Mimi——

There was Aunt Bessy to think of, and Uncle Sam. They would both be heart-broken. His engagement was the dream of many years come true.

Politically, too. His party had been pointedly flattering of late. Was the rich wife in the background of this? He knew she was. Not in any mere mercenary sense, but as the daughter of a prominent old resident of Sanbridge, the donor of the public library site and the green acre of West City Park, and as being herself the sort of wife who would give a rising young statesman a dignified home, a proper background of social standing and hospitality.

Stephen thought of all this as the train made its final stop at Warren's Mills, and as he engaged a livery hack upon which to ride up to the cabin. Ordinarily he would have driven straight from Sanbridge in his

car, but to-day was out of the ordinary. He would take them all by surprise.

He reflected that some other way would have been wiser; wiser to write Mimi that he had something important to say. Or perhaps write her the whole story, omitting Lucretia's name, of course.

Up—up—up, wound the wooded road, sometimes passing a cabin perched high in the pines, but for the most part a deserted brown shelf rising through the miles and miles of summery greenness. Stephen knew every inch of it; he and Fred had hunted and camped in these woods every summer of their lives.

The dead oak; how the weary, dusty children of twenty years ago had wriggled and squirmed in the surrey, as they watched for that landmark! That proved them near the end of the hot day's trip, in another half hour they would be in old clothes, streaming up through the orchard, leaning over the brook, half-mad with the excitement and ecstasy of getting into the country again! Cookies—peaches—old Matea's saucer pies—forgotten fishing-rods and bathing-suits!

And even in those remembered days, squarely built, responsible, gentle little "old Steve," had been always the guardian of wild and reckless "Freddy," and of the little gipsy Mimi of the ginghams and straw hats. When Stephen was twelve years old, Fred was eight, and Mimi only five.

"What's your name—no, but tell me your name—shut up, Freddy, while the baby tells me her name! G'wan, tell me your name—tell Teevy your name!"

He would kneel, perhaps in the pattern of the sunlight through the big pale grape leaves, with the bashful, laughing Mimi before him.

"Go on—what's your name! Take that nasty sunbonnet string out of your mouth, and tell me your name!"

The dark eyes would glint up through the baby's lashes.

"Ma'y Yo'andy Wa'wen!" Mimi would squeak, in her little treble.

It always made him laugh, delighted with her mispronunciation.

"That's a darling! That's a good, *good* baby!" The freckled, clumsy little boy would catch her up in his arms, frightening and enchanting her, as a reward.

And now he and that Mary Yolande—that same little grinning girl in the sunbonnet, were man and woman, and had the plan of their marriage been fulfilled, they would still be coming up here, every summer, perhaps some day with another mischievous little Mimi, and clumsy adoring Stephen——

Mimi loved children, and would make a wise little mother——

A sudden thrill shook him, his heart stood still, raced for a few lightning seconds, seemed to turn over, with an odd, frightening, and yet wonderful sensation. Unbidden had come the thought of Lucretia, with her tawny braid falling over one shoulder, and a child in her arms.

To possess her, to have that miracle come to complete their love and their happiness! Stephen looked off across a canyon that was filling with the first purple light of the waning afternoon, a purple shot and flooded with hot gold. For the first time in his life parenthood seemed to him the crowning pride and achievement of life.

He thought of the men he knew; their wives and children. And he thought of himself looking at Lucretia, the beautiful, mysterious, amber-eyed Lucretia, newly lovely, and with the aura of motherhood about her, and of the child of whom he might say "my son."

CHAPTER XVIII

"STEPHEN *Winship!*"

It was Mimi herself, answering his call at the open door of the cabin, materializing suddenly from the dimness within, and quite simply putting her arms about his neck, and kissing him on the cheek.

"Aunt Bessy!" she called. "Marjorie! Look who's here! Steve—but sit down there, and we'll get you some lemonade—Steve, you old darling! We were going to meet you on the afternoon train to-morrow. And can you stay until Sunday night? Oh, goody!"

She was looking very pretty in the khaki knickerbockers and loose white blouse, with leggings and sturdy brown shoes that were a sort of uniform for Marjorie and herself in the mountains. Mimi was always charming at the cabin, happy and at her ease, full of gaiety and hospitality.

And Stephen found the cabin itself delightful to-night; there was a stillness and bigness about the encircling woods, a piny fragrance in the air, a deep and soothing silence everywhere. The little house, smelling so pleasantly of wood, the delicious cool supper served on the side porch, the walk he and Mimi and Marjorie took, inspecting the tennis-court and the creek, the fruit-trees and spring-house, were so many sources of satisfaction. The sun went down, the light faded into wonderful blue and amethyst, long before twilight was

gone, the young moon rose into the still-lighted sky, and hung over the rising pyramids of the pines.

Stephen was no moral coward, but as the evening progressed, with a hundred shy evidences of affection from Mimi, a hundred allusions to the wedding from Marjorie and Ted, a hundred casual hints from the Judge as to what might be expected from the party when the primaries came about next spring, he felt his resolution change rather than falter.

Could he disrupt all this happiness and confidence? And if he could, should he do so? What was his devotion to Lucretia, after all, but a sudden moment of selfishness, far, far more easily wiped away than this established and dear old order of things, to which life had bound him as it had bound all this loved group.

The tide came back. He loved Mimi, loved them all—loved the thought of other summers here, of making them all pleased and happy and secure in their various ways! The Keystone Road house would be their home, and Aunt Bessy and Uncle Sam would come to Christmas dinner, and there would be a chance perhaps to bring Fred and Marjorie together. Far wiser to pursue this allotted scheme of things than to find himself, perhaps in some Western city, beginning his career all over again, looking at five- or six-room apartments with Lucretia——

But again the thought of her betrayed him, and his heart stood still, raced—performed that extraordinary and thrilling revolution. House-hunting with Lucretia —to share a dining-room and a sitting-room, to plan Sundays together, to introduce the beauty and radiance of her as "my wife!"

He put the thought away. His final reflection was

that a gentleman did not withdraw his offer of marriage with a lady, whatever the circumstances. Ted Rutger was extremely gallant with Mimi, and Fred, who came up the next day, overwhelmed her with affectionate attentions; Stephen had a mad moment of hoping that Mimi herself might waver. How easy he would make it for her!

But there was no wavering for Mimi, and whenever they were alone together she showed him something of her devotion and loyalty, and he found himself awkward and uncomfortable in the rôle of lover.

It was not hard to embrace her, it was indeed perfectly natural to kiss her. But to put fire into these things, and to sustain the little murmur of nothing at all that is the lover's joy, was beyond his power. He interested himself in whatever she said, smiled, answered intelligently and fully, but he knew himself that there was in these talks nothing of the monosyllables, the undertones, the significant glances, the little discoveries and surprises, confessions and questions, that had made those hours in the train with Lucretia so exquisite to remember.

Phrases of hers came back to him, detached phrases said in that low, amused voice of hers: "Have you read *everything*, Stephen? If you are very good I will sing for you some day! You must have been a serious little adorable freckled goose of a boy when you were seven!"

And she had dropped that incredibly smooth brown hand of hers between their chairs, so that his own hand could find it, and hold it, for some ten wonderful minutes.

Perhaps love for Mimi—the passionate love for

which the girl was so innocently hungering—would come after they were married? He hoped, he tried to assure himself, that it would!

On Sunday afternoon, in the late quiet hours, when the effect of the hot day and of the too-heavy midday dinner had somewhat dissipated, he said his good-byes for another week. Mimi offered to walk with him on his way to the train to the lower gate, above the now-deserted mill, where they had dammed the creek into a swimming-hole.

They led Stephen's horse, sauntered away from the house after Stephen's farewells, into the dimness and sweetness of the woods.

"Steve," Mimi said, suddenly, in a not quite natural voice, "there was something I wanted to speak about. I was wondering if it would be better for you if we delayed the formal announcement of our engagement a little, made it some time this winter, say?"

It was said—and she had not broken down. She walked along slowly beside him, her heart like lead, her throat thick.

This was his opportunity. But his sense of her generosity—considering all it meant to her!—was so keen, and his pity for her suffering so deep, that he could not take advantage of it.

"Mimi, why do you say that?"

"Because," she said, steadily, "I think perhaps we made a mistake!"

"After all these years?" Stephen hated himself for his weakness, but he could not see her suffer so!

"What do they count!" she said, impatiently. And as if the little burst of anger spurred her to self-control, stopped in the road, and faced him bravely. "Isn't

it better to end it now, if we *have*," she asked, sternly, "than to go on until it is too late?"

[His own words to Lucretia. If he could only accept this most unexpected solution of the whole problem!]

"Why do you say that, Mimi?" he asked again.

"Because I know you don't care as I do, Steve," Mimi said, fighting the pain in her throat, and the pain behind her eyes, and the worst pain of all in her heart.

He could not answer her in words; he was still, looking down.

"You see that?" she asked, sick suspicion turned to sick certainty now. And to her soul the quick wish stabbed, that she had not asked him, that she had been satisfied with what he could give her, rather than forcing this bitter issue!

"I suppose I see that I am not an especially—especially demonstrative man, Mimi," he said, slowly.

"Steve, be honest with me! Do you love me? No, I don't mean as Aunt Bessy and Uncle Sam do! But as much as you could love any woman?"

They faced each other in the green afternoon silence. Not a bird moved in the woods, Stephen's horse crunched a low branch of some overhanging shrub.

"You are not satisfied, then?" Stephen said, in his troubled, uncertain voice.

"Answer me!" she responded, briefly.

Silence. He continued to look down blindly for almost a full minute of silence, then he looked up at her with the smile she loved, only now it had a new element of pity and sorrow.

"Mimi, dear, I'm sorry!"

The girl dropped her face into her hands and turned

her back upon him for a few seconds. Stephen did not speak again, or make any attempt to touch her.

"Oh, my God!" he heard her say in a whisper.

When she turned about she was very pale, tearless, and composed. Her voice was dry and quick.

"Stephen, why did you never tell me?"

"Mimi, dear, there was nothing to tell. There is nothing now. You have always been one of the dearest people in my life, you always will be. I am sorrier than I can say——"

"Oh," she said, sharply, breathing hard, "please don't *pity* me!"

There was another silence, while she looked down and far away, her breast rising stormily, her teeth caught in her lower lip.

"I knew it," she said, quickly, "of course I knew it, from the very beginning! But I thought it was because you were so busy, and perhaps because you were never a particularly emotional sort of man—never like Fred and Ted——

"And I thought perhaps after we were married—it might all come—other women told me that it did, sometimes—and in books, and plays——"

"Mimi, isn't it enough that I respect you, and truly love you, and admire you? It *will* come, dear——"

"Oh," she said, drawing herself away from him, "do you think I would marry you now? No, I'll never marry any one—never any one, now!" And again she looked down and away, with a brooding face.

"Why not postpone it, as you suggest?" Stephen said, after a pause. "Then, in a few months——"

She looked at him, angry dark eyes bright through her tears.

"That you can agree to that!" she said, raging. "Steve, what do you think I am!" And she came close to him, and looked up at him challengingly. "Do you think I will go through that farce of a white gown and a veil, and your mother's pearls, and a trip to Atlantic City—with you merely kind and bored!" she said, trembling. "I loved you—I love you, I'm not ashamed of it! But I will kill myself before you ever put your finger on me again!"

He looked at her gravely; she knew that kindly, somewhat puzzled look. She and Fred had treated him to their rages before this. And with that look, that always seemed to ask from them patience and an explanation, everything that was hard and sore in her seemed to melt. She loved him so—she had always loved her square, serious, tender guardian and champion!

"Steve," she said, tears springing to her eyes now, and her hand on his arm. "You mustn't mind my being so angry! I'm angry at myself—I made you ask me—ah, yes, I did, although you thought you did it of your own accord! I've been so happy," faltered Mimi, "thinking that you always had cared, but that perhaps you didn't know it! All these months, buying linen, and buying that house you hated—all that time I knew that you didn't care. I know you meant what was kind, in telling me," she finished, after a pause, "and I suppose I ought to be glad!

"Now, how shall we tell people?" She seemed to be speaking to herself, and merely made a silencing, impatient gesture toward him when he would have spoken. "I didn't lose much time in telling them before!" she added, with a little rueful laugh. "Ste-

phen, if you don't mind, I shall just tell Aunt Bessy and Uncle Sam that it's a delay," she went on, a little feverishly, "or perhaps even that won't be necessary for a few weeks. Uncle Sam isn't well——"

Her sudden self-possession and her thought for the old people hurt him more than either of the previous moods.

"Mimi, dear," he said, "you don't know how badly I feel about this. Why not start fresh——"

"Start fresh!" she echoed in amazement and scorn.

"I mean—since there is so much—their happiness, and the old, old affection between us—need you say anything to them now? Mightn't a few weeks make a difference——"

"You mean that I am to go on getting ready to be married?" Mimi asked, directly.

"What I meant was that I wanted you to know how I felt——"

He stopped, even to himself he seemed to be making no headway; he was confusedly conscious of having lost all sight of his goal.

Mimi came close to him, and looked up at him with a determined, if pale, little face.

"Don't make any mistake, Stephen," she said, breathlessly. "Our engagement is *over*. But for the sake of the others I don't see anything else to do but wait—about telling them, I mean. We have always said October, but nobody outside of the family knows that there was any date set! So that," Mimi finished, with the quick manner of one who ends a distasteful business, "that ends it. We are not engaged—that is all over. I don't care what you say to people, or what they think. It's *over*. And now, unless you go on, you will miss your train!"

She made a farewell gesture with her hand, and walked quickly up the road under the big trees, her small figure, in the odd little Sunday dress of blue gingham and red cotton, disappearing about a turn some hundred yards away.

He did not know that when she was out of sight she sat down upon a wayside log, and rested her elbows upon her knees and her chin in her hands, and so sat, staring blankly before her, for the hardest hour that she had ever known.

She knew that she would not die, and death was the only thing she wanted. Just to get away from the tongues, and the eyes, and the surprise, and the pity! For a long while she made no sound, but she felt as if her heart were slowly bleeding, while everything that had been bright and wonderful in life darkened and faded, and turned into menace and hurt.

Stephen——! If the red sun that was going down behind the far end of the mountain had suddenly scowled at her, Mimi would not have been much more frightened and horrified. Stephen had always been so good to her, it had seemed so natural that he should go on taking care of her until the end of time! She had so joyfully taken his gallantry and his interest and his concern for granted, wanted it all—always.

Her face burned with shame. She had taken too much for granted—that was the trouble. She had given herself too readily, dancing so lightheartedly into the questions of gowns and houses and rugs and linen!

The world was turned upside-down for Mimi as she walked slowly back to the cabin. Apart from her own wretchedness, there would be the suffocating business of telling the others——

Aunt Bessy would cry, and the Judge puff out denials and deprecations. And they would be angry at Stephen. Mimi felt a bitter satisfaction in the thought of their utter disappointment in their idol.

Fred and Ted Rutger had gone back to the city on the morning train, but Marjorie and the older people were on the front porch, in the first sweet coolness of sunset, when she came slowly back. Marjorie said with spirit that she confidently expected to see Stephen, too! He certainly had missed his train. They had been waiting and waiting for her. Nobody wanted any supper yet. Marjorie pulled Mimi down beside her and snuggled an arm about her waist; she saw the signs of tears in Mimi's eyes, if the others did not, and she suspected a mood of depression.

The two girls sat silent, while Marjorie's parents, the Currans, and Mrs. Porter, drifted into a conversation that was reminiscent of the Sanbridge of forty years ago. Marjorie, who had been flirting, playing tennis, laughing, riding, swimming, and dancing violently for the past forty-eight hours—for the young people by no means confined their activities to the immediate neighborhood of the cabin—felt a certain reaction, and was quiet. Mimi leaned against her, her eyes brooding, her mind and heart a centre for stormy and miserable thoughts.

The lovely twilight fell, the air was cooler, crickets began to scrape in the grass, and in the silence the tumbling waters of the creek made a pleasant liquid undertone. The red summer moon came up over the edge of the upland meadow, the fruit-trees dropped inky shadows in the first silver flood. A whip-poor-will called in the woods, came nearer, died away.

Mimi felt that her heart was breaking with pain, and beauty, and loss. She looked so white, when they finally went in to find themselves a supper in the dim warm gloom of lamplight, that her aunt suggested bed.

The tears came into the girl's eyes, she sipped iced coffee, played with her salad, and presently excused herself, and kissed them all wearily good-night.

But when Marjorie came into the bedroom they shared, half an hour later, Mimi had made no move toward undressing, but was standing by the window, staring absently out at the sweep of clearing that lay between the cabin and the woods.

"You and Steve have had a quarrel!" Marjorie said, with an almost pleased interest, coming to put her arm about the other girl's waist.

Mimi tried to smile.

"Not exactly a *quarrel!*"

"Oh, Mimi, I thought you and he had never had a word in your lives!" exclaimed Marjorie, thrilled.

"Well, we never *have*," Mimi said, leaden-hearted.

"Mimi, don't you mind it!" warm-hearted Marjorie consoled her. "Why, that's part of the fun! When I'm engaged I know I shall just work myself up to fights—just for the fun of making up, getting a note from him that he's going to cut his throat, and all that! And then having him call, and sweeping into the drawing-room, very busy—no time to waste on him——!"

"Margie, you goose!" But Mimi was really smiling now, and she rubbed her cheek against Margie's as if it comforted her to have this commonplace and cheerful construction placed upon her catastrophe. "It

isn't—just like that," she hesitated, her face darkening.

"You think it isn't. But all love-affairs are just alike!" said the sage Marjorie. "Now come to bed—we're all dead tired. Sunday luncheons ought to be forbidden by law, anyway in summer," mused Marjorie, beginning briskly upon the unlacing of her high boots. "I marvel that any engagement ever survives a July Sunday afternoon! Fried chicken and strawberry shortcake; I wonder that we don't have pictures of them on the national seal! Matea's cream gravy alone is a full meal. Now, mark my words, Mimi, for all you look so serious, Stephen Winship is feeling a lot worse than you do, he's probably at the club by this time, thinking what a fool he's been to make you unhappy!"

This view of the case appealed to Mimi's reason. After all, what had Stephen said? That he was not sure he loved her enough, that was all. And wasn't that adorably like Steve, when one analyzed it, to be afraid he was not quite fervent enough? Wasn't that a part of his extraordinary scrupulousness?

Mimi was refreshed by tears, she had eaten no supper, and felt pleasantly exhausted and relaxed. The strain at her heart was relieved; might this be but a lover's quarrel, after all, as Margie had suggested? The delicious anticipation of reconciliation warmed her very soul. That angry talk in the road would become only the cause of a wonderful reunion, when she would have Stephen's arm about her again while they talked the whole thing over, and while he told her that he could not live without his Mimi, and she confided in return that the measures of devotion he could give her more than satisfied her heart.

"You may be very sure," said Marjorie, through

the bristles of her tooth-brush, "that Steve is biting a club pen to pieces while he writes you eleven pages of explanation! I suppose he told you that he thought Grace had pretty hair, and you said that he had always admired her——"

Stephen's lack of enthusiasm for Grace being well recognized, Mimi laughed.

"Not at all. It was—well, I'll tell you what it was, Marge!"

"You don't have to tell me!"

"I know I don't—I want to! It was that Steve thinks he doesn't show enough emotion—that is, that he isn't demonstrative enough—that while he feels—feels a lot——" Mimi stopped, smiling, for Marjorie's eyes were dancing.

"Now *don't* tell me you two idiots——" Marjorie stopped in her turn, as if made speechless by such stupidity.

Mimi laughed. There were neither the anticipated tears nor sleeplessness for her that night.

CHAPTER XIX

STEPHEN, meanwhile, was but a few miles away, over the mountain ridge at Gunther's hotel in Farley's. He had, as Marjorie suspected, missed his train, but the station-master had advised him to ride the four miles to Farley's, where the big hotels sometimes sent an omnibus into the city with late Sunday guests.

The omnibus had been gone ten minutes when he reached Farley's. But an old surrey was about to leave for the Gunther House, and the driver assured him that he could find supper and a bed there. There was no train for the city until three o'clock in the morning; he had better stay over, and go in with the Monday crowd at seven o'clock.

"I suppose I could get in at the Corkoran or the Imperial House?" Stephen said. These were close to the station. The driver of the Gunther surrey shrugged a dubious shoulder.

"Maybe ye could," he said. "But you *sure* could up our way!"

So Stephen, with his heart expectant as a boy's, got into the surrey, and was driven up the hill. And when he descended before the long porches of the old colonial farmhouse, among the scattered guests who were waiting for Sunday supper he saw Lucretia.

She was down at the foot of the garden, in the doorway of an old summer-house, in white, with a broad

white hat. Two or three very small children were with her; she was seated among them, in a green iron chair, and she had a tiny black kitten in her hands. The twilight lay glowing upon her warm skin, and the light of the summer day was in her wonderful eyes.

When Stephen went toward her, she rose, and a smile twitched the corners of her mouth, and she gave him her hand with a look that swept away every vestige of reason or resolution from his mind. His whole world was centred here, where these eyes were shining, where this smooth, vital hand was waiting, where this rich voice—with the note in it that was not quite protesting, not quite mused, not quite maternal, but something of all three—was saying:

"Stephen! What brings you here?"

"What do you think?" he stammered, feeling the solid walls of earth melt away, and the dim, miraculous vistas of paradise open before him.

The hours that followed were among the few that life ever gives of perfection. Stephen and Lucretia were in an enchanted world, lighted by a lingering summer sunset, a long, perfumed twilight, and by the moon that came up suddenly red and enormous, and sent long shadows from the haycocks in the mountain meadow, and that mounted into a pale, trembling, luminous summer sky.

They dined side by side, finding the country fare delicious; Stephen making himself fascinating, now and then, to the thrilled little music teacher who chanced to be his left-hand neighbor at the long table, and Lucretia exchanging an occasional friendly word with the old sea-captain on her right.

To each other they murmured only commonplaces,

if anything could be commonplace on this night of midsummer magic. They must see "Ma" first, Lucretia told him, and then perhaps they could take a stroll? Stephen felt a sense of suffocation, and actual suffusion of the heart, as he thought of the walk.

"Ma," an enormous grizzled old country woman, whose oily warm old face made her seem of another race and sex than the radiant Lucretia, was pleased to meet the District Attorney of Sanbridge, and get his opinion of her lemon meringue pie. She remembered him when he wasn't no bigger than her Tom's Tommy, she said. Once when they was measles over to Warren's Mills, and he and his folks were there, his Ma had sent him and his brother up to her for awhile, guess he didn't remember that? So he was a friend of Mis' Lombard's? Yes—Ma mused inconsequentially, Tom died you know and his wife died 'fore he did——

They left her spread rather than sitting upon a wide rocking-chair, palm-leaf fan in hand, two or three noisy granddaughters clattering pans in the hot, lamp-lighted kitchen near by. It was lovely to saunter away between the currant bushes, under the dusty, thick-leaved apple-trees, past the dry, clean-smelling litter of the barnyard, to the stone-fenced meadows ringed about with pines, where the moon was pouring her dim radiance, transforming and bewitching all the world.

Lucretia seated herself upon the rough lichened surface of a projecting boulder, and Stephen settled himself in the grass at her feet, and lighted his cigarette. His shoulder was against the rock, one arm flung over it, her frail full white skirts billowed close beside him. Her fine bare hands were clasped quietly in her lap,

she was slightly leaning back, to touch the projecting back of the rock, and upon her face the mingled glow of twilight and moonshine threw an exquisite and unearthly light. She took off the white hat, and Stephen saw the little silky pressure it had left upon her shining hair.

It was all magic, whether they talked or were silent, both were steeped in unutterable content. Stephen felt that he would have liked to sit so forever, with the mountain's shoulder falling away below him, and the furry gray tops of the trees swimming in milky moonlight, and the good summery smell of forest and drying weeds about him.

"I have never loved a woman before," he told her.

"No; nor have I ever loved before," she answered, simply. And thoughtfully she added, "But I always knew that I *could*."

"I suppose I did, too! But it's funny," mused Stephen. "This—this feeling makes me love everything and everybody—conductors on trains, even, and the people I pass in the street! If I see a milliner's window, I think it's nice," said Stephen, smiling at his own absurdity, "to think that girls can go in there and buy new hats, and if I come to a place like this—it seems to me wonderful that an old woman like Mrs. Gunther can be so useful and so happy, and that summer's wonderful, and life is wonderful, and that everything is all right!"

He heard her laugh; she did not speak for awhile.

"I've been thinking," she said, presently, "that in the—the amazement of discovering what we meant to each other, last Thursday, we have been perhaps a little selfish. Did you—did you talk to Mimi?"

"Don't," he pleaded, "don't let us be heroic tonight!"

"We won't be heroic," she assured him. "I don't think there is any need for heroics! But I have been thinking that we were a little—carried away. Whatever you feel for Mimi, and have come to feel for me, we must move with a certain decency! I have been widowed for only five months, you are engaged to another woman."

"But, Lucretia——" he began, impetuously, interrupting himself. "Why did you put your fingers on my cheek?" he asked.

"Because I like to hear you call me Lucretia, I suppose."

"Lucretia, then. I was going to say that I *cannot* have you talk about renunciation, and all that. These forty-eight hours, since Friday, have taught me that there is nothing else in the world but you! I love them all—all the others, but it is because I love you so!"

"But, Stephen, this is what I want to say. I see no reason to be precipitate, dear—even if it were right for me, it is not for you! Did you—could you say anything to Mimi?"

"I talked to her. I didn't get much said," he confessed.

"She felt badly?"

"She made me feel like a rotter. In fact—in fact, I had to leave it all up in the air! I said that I was afraid I was not giving her as much as she—as she had a right to claim, do you see? I don't know just how I expressed it, but that was the gist. She—you know she's wonderful, Mimi!——"

"Oh, I know she is. She was angry?"

"Well, in a way she was. She broke the engagement——"

"Broke it!" breathed Lucretia.

"Yes. And then I persuaded her not to tell the old people—I suggested that it simply rest as it is for awhile——"

"Yes, that is what I meant!" she said, eagerly. "The engagement is broken?" she asked, slowly, after a pause.

"Mimi said so. But I am not sure she really meant it. A talk like that is awfully hard to get over," Stephen explained, somewhat apologetically.

"Oh, Stephen, frightful!"

The three words lingered like music on the summer air; her sympathy was exquisite to him.

"Leave it so for a little while," she said, "Mimi will make some plan, perhaps go abroad, the thing may gradually solve itself. You and Mimi were engaged—a few friends knew it. Now it is broken, Mimi goes away perhaps—some other excitement comes up. And then some time next year—next summer at about this time—you and I are quietly married—and come up to Gunther's!"

The thought choked him; he pressed his lips against her hand. Here and everywhere—his wife. There would be one room, down there in the old farmhouse, whose gracious, primitive gable lifted itself over an edge of the meadow. Their room!

After awhile they wandered, talking all the time, back through the now broad and splendid moonlight to the house; the bright white night was full of movement and voices. Sharp tree shadows lay against the mild face of the old colonial farmhouse; the orchard

was all silver and inky blots; light swam like a floating veil across the valley. Groups passed them; they heard laughter and exclamation.

"Isn't it a wonderful night, Mrs. Lombard!"

"Isn't it quite extraordinary?"

"Did you see the moonrise, Mrs. Lombard?"

"Indeed, I saw every instant of it!"

Stephen loved her friendliness, the ready, gracious replies. Ma Gunther assailed her from the dim, creaking shadows of the hot porch. Seventy years of moonrises had sated Ma Gunther.

"Don't suppose ye feel like a game of Halmy in the parlour, Mis' Lombard?"

"I feel just like it!" Lucretia's fragrance and her white thin skirts swayed toward Stephen in the dark. "It's her one delight, and it won't take long!" she whispered, apologetically.

They went in, to supper-scented heat and red lamplight. A June bug batted about among rick-rack picture frames and china statues. Stephen sat in a patent rocker with red ball-fringe, and turned the pages of a copy of a magazine some months old, and watched Lucretia. The old lady's knotted, oily hands trembled joyfully over the tiny red and yellow men.

He felt the perspiration upon his forehead; Lucretia looked cool, although there was a delicious hint of babyish dampness up where the smooth, clear brown forehead met the rich, tan-brown hair. The fine brown hand, with the little pearl buttons on the transparent cuff, moved quickly and surely; the even thick brows were knitted; extraordinary creature that she was, the game absorbed her!

It was a part of her, this utter simplicity. He

thought it vaguely akin to her acceptance of the rectory in Kingsgreen Square; it was her own way of living, and she offered it gladly to the world. Imagine Marjorie,—indeed, imagine Mimi, humoring this delighted old lady in this fashion, quite simply sitting down to this preposterous game! Especially with an admitted admirer about, to witness the old organ and the whatnot, the shells and antimacassars of the Gunther parlor.

"Keepin' ye from your beau, dear?" said Grandma, in the heat of the second game.

"Indeed you're not! He didn't come to see me. Mr. Winship has been up at Red Pine, above Warren's Mills, with Judge and Mrs. Curran," Lucretia answered laughing. "He missed the train!

"You're afraid you're losing the game, Ma, that's why you're worrying about Mr. Winship," she added, serenely, after a busy moment.

"No, I ain't afraid I'm losin'," cackled her hostess, with a proud glance at Stephen. "I ain't never played with nobody like Mis' Lombard," she confided to him, "she certainly has a wonderful mast'ry of Halmy. I've played for years, off'n on, but declare if she don't beat me, now and then!"

"You see, Mrs. Gunther won't play from sunset Saturday night until after sunset Sunday," Lucretia explained, with the serious look of a good child. "So she looks forward to this game!"

The room was suffocatingly hot; Stephen had fallen into a sort of weary daze when Lucretia touched him upon the shoulder. He stumbled up, laid aside his book, blinked.

"Come out for just a breath of air before it's time

to go to bed!" she said. He followed her into the grateful darkness of the garden.

A good many of Ma's boarders had gone in; it was eleven o'clock. The moon was still majestically moving across the purple-blue luminous expanse above them, the stars were throbbing rhythmically in the soft night.

They went down to the old summer-house, and looked out through its big arched openings at the changing beauty of woods and fields in pouring, mystical moonlight; Stephen's chair so close to her own that he could lay his arm along the iron support behind her, and when she turned to speak to him, to laugh, to faintly protest at something that he said, he felt the movement of her silky hair like a little wave of perfume against his cheek.

He could see the topaz eyes in the gloom, the flowing spread of white skirt, the hint of slenderness, of roundness, of young firmness and straightness that made every inch of her beautiful. One of his hands fell on her further shoulder. and she put her smooth fingers up to hold it.

For almost an hour they talked together; then suddenly she told him that they must go in. He held her for one deep and fragrant and intoxicating kiss—and one more—and one more, drinking of the red young mouth, and straining the whole lovely woman toward him, as if he never could let her go.

Then she half ran up the garden path, dragging him by an imperious hand, and they were in the hallway again; a hallway still hot and odorous now of kerosene and the strong oil in some mosquito poison. And here she whispered to his whirling senses a laughing

good-night, and fled up the dim stairway with never a backward look.

Stephen was dizzied with emotion; he had never had half-a-dozen such hours in all his life. He had been remembering, as perfect, the afternoon in Kingsgreen Square, the little trip from Sanbridge to Farley's. But this was utter ecstasy, this summer moonlight, these long, deep, murmured talks, this laughing, sweet, enchanting woman, whose beauty was spinning in his eyes and his heart and his soul like a hundred kaleidoscopic pictures.

He could not resign her to the stuffy, candle-lighted upstairs of the farmhouse. He walked out upon the grass again, looked up at windows. One or two gleamed dimly—were dark. She had gone to bed. He would not see her again to-night!

Mrs. Gunther had consigned him to another building, once a tenant-house, now used as an annex. But he could not go to bed. Her voice sounded in his ears, he was smothered and drowned in the beauty and delight of her. He was too rich even to count his treasure of words and smiles and glances; it was as if he gathered them in his hands, in a very madness of possession, and let them fall in a wild river of riches about him.

Perhaps that was her window; perhaps, robed in white, and with her hair braided, she was looking down. Stephen longed for one more word from her—one glance! But there was no stir in the shadowy oblong that showed against the black, plain rise of the house. If she was standing there, with her wild heart beating like his own, she gave no sign.

As motionless as the leaf shadows, he stood against

the trunk of a great maple, looking up. A hot night wind stirred the heavy branches, sighed as if the whole earth sighed with heat and weariness. There was a clicking of twigs, the lacy pattern of silver and black about him shifted and was still.

After a long while he shivered, turned, and went slowly toward his own bed. He would see her in the morning; she had said so.

CHAPTER XX

A FEW days later Stephen found Mimi waiting for him, when he went home from his office to the swathed and darkened rooms of the Curran home. She wore her pongee travelling coat, somewhat crumpled, and a small tan hat swathed in creamy veils, and looked serious and mischievous at once.

"Aunt Bessy thought that there was something the matter with her heart," she said, demurely, "and I *knew* that there was something the matter with mine. So we came down to see Doctor Sayre. Steve, haven't you anything to say to me?" She widened her gipsy eyes and came close to him. "After the way you talked, up on Red Pine!"

"Well, well, this is a surprise!" Stephen smiled, amazingly disconcerted, taking her hands. "Why didn't you telephone?"

"We came so suddenly. No," said Mimi, prettily warding off his attempted kiss of greeting, "I don't kiss people I'm not engaged to! You have to show me all over again how much you like me!"

A week of Marjorie's counsel, and her own knowledge of Stephen, had somewhat restored Mimi's confidence. She had long before this persuaded herself that Stephen's attitude had been only that of the too-modest lover.

He was extremely tired, his heart sank with discouragement and doubt. He *did* like her, he loved her, but every glance of these dark, appealing eyes

made him feel more hideously a hypocrite, more miserably dubious as to his course.

Her very sweetness hurt him. She had evidently steeled herself to be unexacting and trustful, to make him happy and take his devotion for granted.

"Tell me that you are over your nonsense about not being good enough for me, you goose!" she said. The unexpected, resolute philosophy of it confused him. "You're dead," she observed, immediately, in a tone of sympathy. "Is it the horrible Bowlder case—is it those gangsters and gunmen again?"

She had never questioned him about his work before. That was new, too.

"It's a brutal business," he admitted, smiling. Mimi was motherly at once.

"Well, you're coming up to the cabin with us tomorrow night, so don't say you can't!"

"Dearest child, I have to go to Washington tomorrow!"

"To Washington—in this broiling heat! What for?"

"I have to dig up some facts in the Congressional Library—and to see a man that's there, and to do lots of necessary stupid things!"

"Oh, Steve!" Her little face was piteous with disappointment.

"I know, it's too bad."

"Well." She was cheering. "I'll get into something pretty, and you take me somewhere for supper, and let's do the Imperial, and then go up to the roof of the International, and drink things."

"How's Aunt Bessy?"

"Oh, it's nothing!"

"Well, *Mimi!*" he said, still bewildered at finding her here. The dream of a cold supper upstairs, and a letter to Lucretia, faded. Of course he would take her to supper and the roof-garden, but he felt singularly lifeless and weary over the matter. "How about Aunt Bessy?"

"She's to rest, and when we come back, in August, she's to have treatment. She wouldn't go with us to-night anyway. But run up and see her, Steve!"

"I'll tub and change my clothes, and be ready in half-an-hour!" He had kissed her, after all, Mimi's bright eyes full of questioning as he did so. She followed him upstairs; she must bathe and change, too.

While they dined, in an airy corner of the big Hotel International's summer dining-room, with the parched trees of Sanbridge, and the burned roofs, and the motionless faded awnings, far below them, she watched him closely. She chattered naturally enough of Marjorie, and Ted and Fred, and of the new Montgomery baby and the affair between Jerry Stover and Marie Fanning. And she took her salad fork, and pressed upon the tablecloth a little outline of the arrangement of rooms in a smaller but even more convenient house than the one she had originally selected in Keystone Road. The orange straw hat with the circling sweep of bright green feathers was becoming to the eager face, her limp little filmy blouse was green, too, with odd traceries of gipsyish beads and gold stitches ornamenting it. There were jade balls in her ears. He thought she was her prettiest and sweetest self to-night —dear little old Mimi.

And his heart ached and ached at the stupid helplessness and heaviness that enveloped him; that made

it hard even to listen to her. She just—didn't count any more. His fine gray eyes smiled at her automatically; he was careful to order a delicious dinner for her; but his thoughts were fretted almost to exasperation, and the vision of another woman in her place—a woman whose cool white and tan and gold would have made an odd contrast to all this green and orange and brunette sparkle—was constantly before his eyes.

They talked for a few minutes at the foot of the stairs, when he took her home at midnight, then she agreed that she was tired, and went up to her room. He was leaving at seven o'clock for New York and Washington; Mimi smiled a pretty apology. Would he forgive her if she didn't get up to say good-bye?

He would only be gone three weeks, he said, to say something. He would write her, of course.

"Well, of course!" said Mimi, a little blankly, standing on the step above him, and studying him with her troubled, honest eyes.

"That you, Mimi?" called Mrs. Curran from above.

They both came up, and Stephen admitted in turn that he was tired, and quite simply bent over the big bed to kiss his aunt's forehead, under the grizzled curls, and quite simply kissed Mimi, too, before he went up the second flight to his own room.

And to the thought, at last, of Lucretia again.

CHAPTER XXI

MIMI wrote him early in August, when he came back from Washington. She was still in the mountains; they had no immediate plan for a return.

She said, straightforwardly and briefly, that she agreed with him as to their feeling for one another. Their engagement had been a mistake, for which she blamed herself at least as much as him. She had realized again, and convincingly this time, that he did not care in the right way that July night when they went to the International and the theatre together. She had not told any one the full story, but she would take the first opportunity to intimate to her aunt and uncle that affairs were not as they thought, and that she and Stephen had decided to delay all their wedding plans until their feeling was more definite. And she was always his affectionate friend, Mary Yolande Warren.

It hurt him inexpressibly. He felt as if something sweet and good and dear, something that had belonged to him all his life, had been taken away from him, or had died. It was with the pang of a father who realizes that his favorite little daughter has left babyhood and dolls and school-books behind her forever, that Stephen thought of Mimi. The bright, responsive child, to whom he was an oracle, at eighteen; the busy little girl going about the big house so happily, with "Sara Crewe" and "The Admirals Caravan"; the awkward, pretty, earnest girl who had confided

to him her troubles with the High School sorority, and finally the young lady Mimi, with her golf-sticks and her plaid skirts, her inheritance and her first admirers. They were all dead now; he felt as if he had killed them. In their place was the hurt and disillusioned Mimi who would swallow back her tears when she put away the wedding linens and the engagement cups.

It would take so little to reassure her—one page of protest and prayer, and it would be done! But he could not write it. The love he felt for Lucretia was like a fire in his veins, and while it burned there he could give not even affection to any other woman.

Before he answered Mimi's letter Lucretia came back to the rectory for a day, and they had tea in the room of books and photographs. If he had had any previous doubts, they were dissipated by that exquisite hour, when he might watch the beautiful, expressive face, and listen to the rich, wonderful voice again.

She walked with him across the square, the dusty, heavy leaves were motionless, shadows were hot and metallic under the dull, heavy sky of a brooding afternoon. She was translating a book of essays from the French, she was trying to identify a piece of Old Blue china she had seen in a Mercer Street shop, she had a new magazine, out of which she read him a poem whose phrases he never forgot.

The independence, the vitality, the charm of her enchanted him afresh, her soberness, her smiles, her word, and her dreaming silences were all equally enthralling.

He drove her all the way to Gunther's, on the follow-

ing afternoon, going on himself to the cabin on Red Pine. Mimi had sent him a decorous little note; Uncle Sam wanted to see him, and because that old bad pain in his back had returned, Aunt Bessy did not wish him to make the trip into Sanbridge. And she was always his affectionately, Mimi. The formal "Mary Yolande" was once again replaced by her baby name—what a little gentlewoman she was, Stephen thought, studying the dashing hand, the stiff gray paper with a little red pine-tree engraved at the top, the indefinite "Thursday," Mimi's only attempt at a date.

She was demure when they met, picturesquely dressed, delightfully easy with Marjorie and Ted and the dogs and the car, delightfully dutiful with the old persons. The Judge's discomfort made a centre for all their talk and plans; it was immediately arranged that Stephen should drive the old man slowly into town, for medical advice.

In the sweltering heat of a blazing bright Sunday Mimi and Marjorie padded the tonneau of the larger of the two cars with quilts and pillows, Mrs. Curran, trying not to cry, went back and forth with thermos bottles and fans. At about four o'clock the Judge, smiling gallantly, limped forth, on his nephew's arm, and settled himself in the waiting nest with a philosophical comment to the effect that driving was the pleasantest thing to do on a day like this, anyway! His wife established herself beside him, Stephen took the wheel, the girls ran back and forth in a fever of sympathy and concern. It had been just Uncle Sam's familiar backache yesterday. And to-day they were talking of consultations and hospitals!

"Mimi, you've been wonderful," Stephen said, with his brotherly smile. She flashed him a bright look; like all women, Mimi loved a dramatic rôle.

"And just as soon as the doctor says it's nothing, we'll be back!" said Aunt Bessy, peering out between the side supports.

"Now, listen, Aunt Bessy," Marjorie called. "If you don't want to come back before Thursday, I can just as well put off the Maine trip!"

"Oh, yes, let's think of that," Stephen said. "When do you go, Marjorie?"

"Well," Marjorie hesitated. "Thursday, don't we, Mama?"

"Well, we *were*," her mother confirmed, dubiously.

"Then you'd better drive down with Fred—oh, dear—you can't very well—that's—this is Sunday——" Mrs. Curran fretted, in an uneasy stream, when Mimi interrupted her, with that charming mixture of authority and deference that Stephen thought so becoming.

"Now, just don't worry, darling—we've got enough real things to worry about! I'll arrange it, I'll do something—you'll probably be back here yourselves to-morrow! Or maybe Grace—no, Grace can't—but maybe Mrs. Lombard would come over from Gunther's. Anyway, I'm all *right*, I could stay here alone with Matea, for that matter, so just don't *worry*——"

"You might take me as far as Farley's, Steve," Fred said, suddenly animated at Lucretia's name, "I haven't seen her for weeks!"

"Oh, I thought you had to get some sleep," Marjorie jeered.

"Perhaps I had better——" Fred hesitated, with a rending yawn. Some undefined little pain in Stephen's heart disappeared. He pulled on a dirty glove, glanced up at the encircling cup of the woods, dreaming in motionless midsummer heat, and brought his eyes back to the girls. They had linked arms now, slender figures in Sunday white; there was reassurance and even a sort of tender amusement in Mimi's parting look.

When the car had slowly started down the grade, they went back to the cabin, got into their thinnest and coolest attire, and lay upon their beds, in the burning descent of day, in Mimi's shaded bedroom. Fred had disappeared with a yawning mention of being aroused when there was any question of food. An odd strangeness and silence descended with the lingering warm twilight at the cabin; Marjorie's somewhat mournful little widowed mother reviewed illnesses of all sorts: Marjorie reflected that unless they started for Maine on Thursday it would be "no fun" to go to Kennebunkport at all; Mimi told her dancing heart a hundred times that she had been everything that was dignified and composed with Stephen. And he *had* told her that she was wonderful!

Perhaps Marjorie was right, perhaps this was the way of true love, after all!

CHAPTER XXII

This was Sunday afternoon, one of those happy, unsuspicious hours so strange to remember in a lifetime, so impossible to regain. On Monday night Fred drove Mimi into the city, a sobered, white-faced Mimi now, and all of them spent Tuesday in the echoing, odorous walls of a great hospital.

While dear old Uncle Sam, oddly helpless and infinitely dear, in his buttoned nightgown and with his silver, majestic head, was upstairs in the surgery, Mimi and Fred and Mrs. Curran sat in the airy, orderly bedroom, and Stephen came and went with an anxious face. Nurses, lining the bed with warmed blankets, even on this hot day, turned the immaculate counterpane down in a long, expert fold, and murmured to Aunt Bessy, who was trembling and paralyzed with fear, that Mrs. Stover and Mrs. Fanning and Mrs. Porter had telephoned—just to send love, and ask if there was *anything* they could do——

Noon whistles shrilled in the burning city before they brought Sam Curran downstairs; it was seven o'clock that night when Stephen took his aunt and Mimi to a cool little supper that Lizzie, tearfully efficient, had waiting for them in the swathed and darkened house.

But food choked Mrs. Curran, and as she sat at the table her fat, soft face was blotched and bloated with tears. Nothing definite had been said, and after a terrible day the Judge was restlessly and brokenly

sleeping, but they were all sobered with the knowledge that a change had come in the dear familiar ordering of life.

At six o'clock, while they were still at table in the deepening warm dusk, Doctor Sayre was announced. Mimi gave her aunt an apprehensive look. They all went into the drawing-room, Lizzie sympathetically deft in the raising of shades and grouping of chairs. Doctor Sayre sat down with a headshake and a preliminary sigh, fitting his eyeglasses into their case with careful hands.

Mrs. Porter, who had joined them, shook her head, too; Mrs. Curran moaned a little against the folded handkerchief she pressed to her shaking lips. Mimi balanced herself upon her aunt's chair, one arm about the older woman's shoulders.

"You stay with us, Steve, Mimi needs you," his aunt whispered.

"I will, Aunt Bessy!"

"We all need you," faltered Mrs. Curran, weeping.

"What do you think, Doctor?" Stephen said, courageously. The verdict made Mrs. Curran begin to cry quite loudly. Mimi cried, too, and Lizzie, flying for water, was also in tears. Stephen felt his own heart sink heavily; Uncle Sam had always been everything that was generous and good to his sister's children.

It might be one month, or even two, the doctor told them. But it would probably be only weeks. The surgery was too late, years too late. He might come home, in a week or two, might have September and October at Red Pine even; the main thing was to keep him from fretting, and out of pain.

Aghast, the young persons looked seriously at each

other. And Mimi hated herself for a little singing, soaring recognition of one more bond between her and Stephen. They would all need her now!

"Oo-ooo, no—no—no!" moaned Mrs. Curran. "Oh, Sammy—my dear good Sam!"

"Now, *please*, Aunt Bessy!" Mimi was fighting her own grief. She was kneeling on the floor before her aunt, dabbling the quivering face with her own handkerchief.

Mrs. Porter, crying helplessly, took the chair next to Mrs. Curran, and Mimi, with Fred and Stephen and Lizzie to help, took control of the situation heroically. The big bedroom upstairs must be opened and prepared; they must all school themselves to the loving insincerity of making the weeks to come easy for Uncle Sam, to the bitter necessity of facing this incredible change. Mimi and Stephen met quite naturally every day, a dozen times a day, slipped at once into an easy, affectionate reliance upon each other that to the girl at least was reassuring and sweet.

Mimi, they all said, was wonderful. It was one of the first opportunities life had given her to be of service, and she rose to it splendidly. The maids turned to her, her aunt leaned upon her; it was with Mimi that Doctor Sayre left his instructions, and it was to Mimi that Stephen and Fred confided their opinions and their advice.

She went about the quiet, mournful house, a little vision of efficiency and sweetness. The muffled telephone must be answered, there were lists of commissions at the drug-store, there was smoking soup to carry to poor Aunt Bessy, there were conferences in the library with the boys.

"You're a wonder, Mimi!" Fred said.

"I don't know where we'd all be without you!" Stephen added, almost mechanically. But there was a quick gleam in her dark eyes, and something like a smile on her white face, in reply.

Seeing her so, the girl thought to herself, always busy, and beloved, and adequate, he must come to love her. This was not pleasure, now; not flirting and dancing as they had flirted and danced at the Country Club. This was real, this time of danger, illness, and strain, and he must see that she was no longer the old spoiled little butterfly Mimi, the little sister who enjoyed teasing and coquetting. These dark days were filled with a deep happiness for Mimi; she had put Stephen out of her life honestly enough, but circumstances had brought him back again, and in a closer and more intimate relation than they had ever known before.

When she said good-bye to him at the front door, in the morning, it was almost with the dutiful, bright smile of a wife.

"You'll get some fresh air to-day, dear? You look pale," Stephen would say.

"Marjorie is going to take me downtown for an hour, for a little shopping!"

"Couldn't I meet you girls, and take you to lunch?"

"Oh, Stephen, I think not." But how her heart was singing! "I don't like to leave Aunt Bessy; not until we get another nurse. Will you be home for dinner?"

"A little late—maybe. Say about half-past seven. Don't wait! If you're shopping, have you plenty of money?"

And so on and on, with the utter simplicity and con-

fidence of young persons drawn together by a common emergency and sorrow, and conscious, under their gravity, of the joy of real living—real companionship.

Mimi found herself spared all the embarrassing questions she had anticipated, as to the wedding and the immediate plans. Nobody expected her to do more than fill this daughterly rôle, while the Judge lay lingering between life and death.

When they brought him home, he was full of innocent boyish exultation in what he believed was to be a speedy recuperation. He was established in his big walnut bed, and the whole house began to circle about him. Mimi read him the morning paper, Stephen paid him constant visits, discussed local politics with him endlessly, and his wife was never long away from his side. Every night of sleep that he enjoyed, and every dainty little meal that came upstairs to him, deepened his sense of triumph over illness, and made him happy. And while this state of affairs went on, Mimi knew that the question of the wedding was definitely shelved.

Sometimes she would sit thoughtful in the sick-room, sewing or reading, glancing now and then toward the drowsing gray head in the pillows. She would deliberately review the day, remembering every minute of it that touched upon Stephen. She had worn her pink cotton, when she poured his coffee for him at eight o'clock, in a lovely morning twinkle of sunshine, and glass and silver and rose-flowered china. They had talked of the book he was reading, and the gangster case; and Mimi could see now every expression of the clean-shaven, pleasant face, and the shrewd, fine gray eyes. He had laid his warm hand over her own, finding her a special line in a book he had given her.

Had she heard rain in the night? There had been a storm. Would she see that Emma got his brown suit to the cleaner? And many thanks about the drop-light, it was working perfectly again.

All so domestic, so unutterably sweet to the heart of a girl who had never had a mother or father, a brother or sister of her own!

Then she had seen him off at the door, and she had been dusting the drawing-room for Lizzie, an hour or two later, when he had made the dim sweetness of its chairs and tables wonderful by suddenly coming in to see Aunt Bessy about some important bit of business touching Uncle Sam's personal affairs.

There was another little conference between Stephen and herself. What had the doctor said? How was Lizzie acting—any more talk of going to her sick sister?

"You're a trump, Mimi!" he often said, when he went away.

"He doesn't know it!" the girl would exult, turning back to her duties, "but he is growing nearer to me all the time! He will miss all this, when things are normal again. And then, I wonder if he'll *really* care, this time!"

She would fall into sorrowful musing; had he ever really asked her to be his wife? Had she so lightly accepted that prospect, as one of the happy, triumphant things of her happy, triumphant life! Mimi knew better now. The mere thought of that old surety made her heart ache, and when she saw, in a closet or bureau, one of the gowns or blouses she had worn in that unbelievably glorious time of flowers and congratulations and engagement presents, last

mid-winter, she felt a pain at her heart. She hated the relentless calendar that made this seven and eight and nine months in the past!

Twenty-three—and thirty—and thirty-five; the years menaced her with spinsterhood. If anything went wrong between her and Stephen, she would be an old maid all her life! Was this the way, the girl wondered, in which such tragedies began?

CHAPTER XXIII

JUST two weeks after the operation, the Judge was moved back to the cabin on Red Pine, and everyone told him that his convalescence was nothing less than an absolute miracle! Now he must be patient, must reconcile himself to idle days under the trees, and must make haste slowly where getting up, and entering upon anything like business responsibilities were concerned.

Happy and unsuspecting, he let them settle him in wicker chairs or hammocks; the Jenkinses only returned to the mountains for an occasional week-end; Marjorie Rutger and her mother were still in Maine; the cabins, other than their own, were shut. But Fred and Stephen and Ted came more constantly than ever, and Mimi showered upon her adored old guardian a love and loyalty that filled his days to the brim. One day she wrote to ask Mrs. Lombard to spend Saturday and Sunday with them.

Mrs. Lombard did not answer by note, but she rode the six miles over the mountain, coming in upon them on a quiet, mid-week afternoon. She wore a dust-colored habit and a small black hat; she drew heavy gauntlets from her fine hands as Mimi ran to greet her.

The girl was extraordinarily glad to see her visitor; she had forgotten how charming and how stimulating she had always found the older woman's society. Now, in these quiet solitary days, with only lonely

walks between Monday and Friday, and reading to Uncle Sam, and long conferences with tremulous, anxious Aunt Bessy, it seemed delicious to hear the firm, quiet voice again, to tell their troubles to a new listener, and to lead Mrs. Lombard in triumph to Uncle Sam.

She sat down beside him, and they began to talk of books and people, the old man's admiring eyes upon her glowing summer beauty, faintly flushed cheeks under the warm tan skin, crushed glittering hair when she took off her small hat.

"Do stay—but could you?—and have supper with us, Mrs. Lombard," Mrs. Curran said, in a flutter of pleasure.

"Stay overnight!" Mimi amended, eagerly. Lucretia looked hesitatingly from one to the other. "Only I wanted you this week-end, too," the girl told her guest, hospitably, "because the Roy Newells, and their baby, and of course Stephen and Fred and Ted Rutger, are all coming up!"

"Week-ends are bad for me," Lucretia said, regretfully. Mrs. Curran looked at her expectantly, but she gave no reason. "Thank you, but I can never come week-ends!" she said, firmly. "But tonight I should love to stay!" And she went back to her previous reasoning with the Judge. "It takes a long time to rally from these things, you know. You must be content with very slow progress for awhile. You get a sort of reaction from the opiates and the narcotics, and that deceives you."

"You've had experience with these things?" Mrs. Curran said, with her pathetic eagerness. "That's just what we *tell* him!"

"Oh, after an operation——" Mimi loved her for not quoting her husband's case; the case she did presently mention was one with a successful ending.

The Judge, who loved pretty young women, was enchanted with her, and Mrs. Curran—over Mimi's quick protest—asked her before supper if she could come and stay with them again, this time for four or five nights, next week. Mrs. Porter could not come, and one or two other friends were out of town, and Mimi had been asked to go on a week's trip by motor-car, up into the Vermont mountains. But Mimi did not like to leave Aunt Bessy with just old Matea and Lizzie, who were not much use in any emergency. On Friday, of course, the boys would come up——

Mrs. Lombard accepted with real pleasure. They were very sweet to make her happy by suggesting that they needed her, even in this wholly simple and pleasant capacity, she said.

"Only, I must go back to Ma Gunther on Friday morning," she said. "I manage her books for her, over these crowded week-ends, keep account of extra lunches and dinners and rooms—she hasn't much system, the dear old thing. I didn't think *I* had——"

She rambled on into reminiscences of her bookkeeping stupidities where foreign currencies and terms were concerned. Presently she helped them move the Judge's paraphernalia into the cabin. Matea grinned at her affectionately; Lizzie confided to Mimi that you could see that Mrs. Lombard was "one that had always *had*." At the dinner table, the trained, beautiful voice led them all into eager and interested talk, and Lucretia's girlish enjoyment of her little

visit added the last touch of satisfaction to Mrs. Curran's approval of her.

In the evening Mimi was directed to write a note to Stephen, to tell him that everything was going splendidly with Uncle Sam. Mrs. Curran went to sleep in her chair, and Lucretia found her old host in an expansive mood.

"You know my nephew Steve Winship, of course, the district attorney?"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" Lucretia glanced toward the dining-room, where Mimi was scribbling under a warm red lamplight. She and the Judge, and his lightly slumbering wife, were on the dark porch.

"I was afraid that my being laid up would change those children's wedding plans!" said the Judge. "But I don't see that it need, now."

He sounded the last phrase with something like a questioning intonation, and Lucretia, who was in the family conspiracy to keep him happy, answered serenely:

"I don't see why it should. Operations are extremely common nowadays. And we have to fit the other things in with them, that's all!"

"Exactly!" said the Judge, with satisfaction. "They'll be married before Christmas!" he added, confidentially, with a little jerk of his head in Mimi's direction. "Next year will be a big year for the boy. I needn't hesitate to tell you that the party has him slated for—well, for Washington. Exactly what we need, you know. Young, clever——"

"Senator?" Mrs. Lombard said, after a moment.

"I hope so. And the little girl will help him—they've known each other all their lives! She's

always looked up to him. His father was a brilliant fellow, John Winship. But unstable—unstable. This boy knew what responsibility and sorrow were—at an age when most boys are children. He took it upon himself——"

The Judge choked, laughed, and fumbled for his handkerchief.

"I am sure he did!" Lucretia said, warmly, and he saw the glint of her shining eyes in the gloom.

"Took it all upon himself," the Judge said, with emotion. "He gave up his school when he was fourteen—he was twenty-one before he could give all his time to his law courses. John Winship left debts, this boy paid them. He used to come into my office, shabby little fellow, with that same keen look on his face that he has now——"

"I know!" she said, under her breath. And she laid one hand upon her heart.

"Bessy and I had Fred in a military school then," resumed the Judge. "Steve was boarding with an Irishwoman down by the Cutler Bridge; she had boys of her own, but he was her real help. He used to carve the joints and manage her affairs, and coach her sons with their arithmetic. And he was teaching night school then. Yes, sir," finished the Judge, half to himself, "that boy has come a long way, and we'll see him go a long way further!"

"Steve——" Lucretia murmured, her voice lingering on the sound.

"I used to ask him to come and stay with us, his aunt has always loved him," said the Judge. "No; he wouldn't do that. Independent—always standing on his own feet. Mimi—she was a cute little thing

then, smartest little girl I ever saw!—Mimi would ask him to come and stay. No use! Well, sir, one night there was some sort of mass meeting at the Civic Centre, and if my boy doesn't stand up and make a speech—it was the speech of the evening, too! We'd always thought that Fred was the one for that sort of thing. I'm proud of him," the old man broke off to say, emphatically, "I'll not deny that I think the boy has a great future! He's young, he's straight, and he's the most brilliant young attorney that Sanbridge has ever produced. I hope we're going to send him to Washington. I told them so. 'Gentlemen,' I said, 'I am not backing your District Attorney for any personal reason. I am not espousing his candidacy because he is my sister's child. I ask you to look at the public record of Stephen Winship——'"

The golden-brown head, a glimmer in the soft summer darkness, had not moved. Lucretia's hands were locked in her lap, her steady eyes were fixed on space.

"Well, give an old lawyer a chance to make a speech!" the Judge laughed, apologetically. "However, you know the boy, and you can imagine that he means a good deal to us. His father and Mimi's father were warm friends. I don't believe Jim Warren, —Mimi's father—saw this coming—no, I can't say that, for Mimi was a mere baby when he and her mother died. But I *can* say, that out of all the world, the man to whom I can most happily give her, is John Winship's son! The day of their wedding will be the happiest day of my life. They can take the old hulk back to the hospital, and take another whack at it, as soon as they like, after that!"

He ended on a whimsical laugh, and he could see a

sympathetic smile on the beautiful face in the shadows.

"The boy is thirty, he needs his wife," he said, comfortably. "She'll be a great help to him—stand right behind him! Well, look here—look here—look here!" he said, as Mimi came out, blinking and yawning, and settled herself at his knee. His old hand fingered her dark head. "How about it—did you get in the row of kisses all along the bottom of the letter?" he asked.

"Uncle Sam, I'm surprised at your crudeness!" Mimi said, severely, kissing the hand she held in both her own. "Kisses! Can you imagine a sweet, womanly woman sending scalloped kisses to a district attorney! Especially," she added, turning toward Lucretia, "especially as Stephen is the worst correspondent in the world! About once a week we have a line, and that's all."

"Men are very bad about that," Lucretia said, uneasily. She had a letter, a book, or a marked magazine from him every day of her life, and sometimes a bit of lace, a nosegay of English primroses in lace paper, or even a flat little box of some special confection as well.

"As a matter of fact, I didn't write Steve at all; I wrote Marjorie about coming up to Kennebunkport next week!" Mimi announced.

"I thought you were going to write Steve!" Mrs. Curran's voice said, unexpectedly.

"Well, I was. But I want him to manage tickets and things for me to-morrow, and it seems better to telephone, and be sure he gets it in time!" Mimi answered, a little airily.

"You and he haven't quarrelled, dear?" Mrs. Curran asked, half-seriously.

"Darling, what should we quarrel about!" But Mimi's laugh was a little unnatural, and Lucretia knew it. "Stephen is an extremely busy man," the girl said, turning to Lucretia, "and he actually has not the time to spend on letters."

"Swelterin' there in that hot city!" his aunt added, resentfully.

"Last Thursday, when there was such an awful storm," Mimi contributed, "we tried to get hold of him. Do you remember that storm that came up at about three o'clock?"

"I was in the city," Mrs. Lombard said. "I had to go in on a matter connected with Allen's estate. I remember it very well!"

And she remembered more, as she spoke: remembered driving with Stephen under sulphurous purple clouds, up and up into the menaced hills outside the city, remembered the livid flashes and the rocking detonations, remembered racing ahead of the first drops into the shelter of a mild-faced old farmhouse, and the farmer's wife who thought she and Stephen were married, and who gave them a delicious late luncheon or early dinner at four o'clock, with whole-wheat bread and Jersey milk and scrambled eggs and wonderful yellow peaches. She remembered driving home under a rapidly clearing sky, the setting sun splitting the purple west with rays of gold, every leaf twinkling, every wayside pool giving back the racing white of clouds, steam smoking upward into the tonic air from farmstead roofs and haycocks. The voice whose every note she loved beside her, the odor of her own drying homespun suit mingling with a thousand other odors of woods and roadside, the delight of languor and

happiness, and the sense that one more perfect memory was added to their list—these she must always remember!

"You got caught in it?" queried Mrs. Curran.

"Not—not unpleasantly. I liked it. Mr. and Mrs. Cutter, from Mrs. Gunther's, drove back to the farm at about six, and brought me with them. It was wonderful then—so fresh and sweet!"

"Mimi was just sick worrying about Steve," the old lady said, mildly. Mimi qualified the remark an hour or two later when she came to the door, in her wrapper, for a last good-night. Lucretia was in bed, placidly turning the pages of a book.

"Aunt Bessy says I worry about Steve—I don't!" Mimi stated, shutting the door behind her, and beginning to brush vigorously under her short, silky black locks. "They say that this stimulates the scalp; do you believe it?" she added, sitting down on the foot of the bed.

Lucretia recognized a confidential mood, and her spirit felt a chill.

"I should think that whirling brain of yours would be a sufficient stimulation," she suggested. "In any case, your hair is delightfully bushy!"

"Yours," said Mimi, simply, looking at the tawny rope of it, "is gorgeous!"

"My mother had a fearful and wonderful Southern treatment, by which one's head was saturated with kerosene, once a year, for three successive nights," Lucretia observed, thoughtfully.

"No, but about Steve," Mimi digressed, suddenly. "I am—well, I think I am foolish, and Marjorie does, but I can't help it!"

"You mean you *do* worry?" Lucretia said, seriously. "You think that he is working too hard?"

"No, not about that, exactly. But Steve—Steve isn't demonstrative, you know!"

The memory of his gripping arms, his hot, almost angry kisses, was in the other woman's mind as she spoke.

"I see!" she said, slowly.

"He never has been," explained Mimi. "He is the dearest—well," she broke off, shamefacedly, "*I* think he is the dearest person in the world!" she amended.

"Of course you do!"

"Do you think—tell me, I can't ask any one else, and you have been married, and you are so wise," the girl said, impulsively, "do you—does—do you think it all comes right afterward, for a man like that, when—when the girl *knows* that she cares, even if perhaps the man——!"

"Cares more than he does, you mean?" Lucretia Lombard said, quietly, laying her hand over Mimi's hand.

The girl laughed, but she had to swallow tears, and there was a glint of them on her dark lashes when she answered.

"Yes, but you see I know Steve—I've known him all my life! He took me to my first football game, he gives me all my money, I tell him everything! And I know that he isn't the sort of man who tears his hair, and writes sonnets, and threatens to kill himself! He would never do that. It isn't *in* him. Fred might—but Stephen wouldn't. Why, he likes all the girls, he's never paid attention to any one but me! There was a woman years ago, an awfully nice woman

here, with two young boys—she was forty when Steve was twenty-two, I think, and we used to tease him about Mrs. Henderson, and about being the boys' stepfather, but that was just a joke! She married a doctor in Chicago, and I don't think he cared a bit! He isn't the—the caring kind. And I know this," finished Mimi, youthfully, "I know that he *does* give me everything he can—nobody else could ever have more, if you know what I mean?"

"If you are sure of that, Mimi——" Lucretia began, and stopped.

"Oh, I'm positive!" Mimi answered, more sure every minute. "And I think I am just imaginative and silly," she added, sensibly, the brush busy again. "I suppose all girls are like that when they are engaged! They think he cares too much, or they think he cares too little! I wish I could stop it, and just remember that we've liked each other all our lives, and that we're going to be married!"

"The probability is," Lucretia said, in a silence, "that most marriages would be far, far happier than they are, if they began on that basis!"

"Well, of course!" Mimi was completely reassured now. The two young women fell to discussing the Judge's disorder in cautious undertones, and its effect upon Stephen's and Mimi's plans.

CHAPTER XXIV

Mimi went to Maine a few days later, and Lucretia duly came and stayed with Mrs. Curran and the Judge. The visit began on a Wednesday, and for the first time that summer Stephen ran up to the cabin for Thursday night, delighting and surprising his uncle and aunt. He addressed the visitor quite simply as "Lucretia"; she had chanced to meet him on the road, she explained, outside the gate, and they entered the house together.

In the twilight, just before dinner, she was delegated to take him and show him the blackberries. They walked up under the dusty, laden apple-trees together; a summery sweetness and silence held the mountain-top; smoke drifted from the cabin chimney; bees wove dizzy roadways through the thick sunset light. Shadows were long and clear, the orchard was a dazzle of shine and shade.

"Steve, we've had the joy of finding each other," Lucretia said, "now it's going to be pain and trouble—all the way. I can't—I can't go on with it, my dear. I can't ruin Mimi's life, and yours, and your uncle's dearest hopes for you——"

"You are too late, Lucretia," he said, with his quiet smile.

"Your career, your Senatorship——" she began again.

"The Senatorship is extremely problematic," he told her, unruffled. "And as for the career—you

are my career! You are my fate. This was the way it had to be!"

She was following an upward trail through scrub pines, now she turned, and the glorious eyes met his wistfully, and she laid her hand on his shoulder.

"No, it didn't. What have I to give you, Steve?" she asked. "Why did I have to come along, to upset everything?"

"It's love, I suppose," he said, in a low voice.

Tears came into Lucretia's eyes.

"You're so sweet, Steve," she said, trying to laugh, as she again began to move restlessly beside him. "And it seems such a terrible pity that you couldn't have gone on in the way you should go! It makes me feel so horribly—this waiting for the blow to fall, for your uncle to die, for Mimi to realize that you love another woman! I don't know what to do about it, except to get out, perhaps——"

"I should follow you," he said, steadily.

"Or marry someone else!" she finished her sentence bitterly.

"Then I should kill him," Stephen said.

"I have no doubt!" Her laugh was full of pain. "What is this *love*," she asked, "that makes it worth while for us to break up so many lives?"

"Lucretia, don't talk so," he said, really distressed.

"It's selfishness—that's what love is!" she said, rebelliously. "All selfishness!"

"I don't think I ever saw you like this," Stephen said, his arresting hand holding her beside him, as he watched her with troubled eyes.

"I have my desperate times!" She tried to laugh again. "Stephen, I'm almost twenty-nine," she said,

with a trace of angry tears, "and I want to be happy! I want people to be *glad* you married me, not always critical and resentful. The women you know will never forgive me, and the men will say that you threw your political chances away! You'll come to see it, too. We'll have a little apartment somewhere, one maid—you'll remember then all Mimi could give you!"

"Please don't talk so!" he said, displeased and hurt.

"Why don't you marry your devoted, domestic, lovely Mimi," Lucretia pursued, spurred by some fretting impulse she could not define. "I don't belong here—I might marry Fred. Everyone would be pleased with that!"

"I don't know you when you are like this!" He stopped her, and held her by the shoulders, trying to read her unhappy eyes. "Lucretia, you didn't talk like this when we were so happy, up at Gunther's!"

"It's always different, just in the beginning!" she said, cruelly.

Stephen turned pale, he felt his throat dry.

"Dearest woman, don't spoil the little, little time we have together by talking in this way. You know we have to go back in a few minutes——"

"Back to Mimi!" she supplied, with a brief laugh.

Stephen dropped his hands, turned toward the house.

"I think we had better go back now," he said. "I'm sorry you feel so unhappy. It is only a question of a little patience for us, and then we can show all the world what we mean to each other. If you will consent, I will tell them all—this afternoon, now!—that you and I——"

"That you have fallen in love with that strange

blonde widow who lives down in Kingsgreen Square," she supplied, still mutinous, "and that you have thrown Mimi Warren over, and that the week in which your uncle may perhaps die is the one in which you choose to break the glad tidings!"

His distress, as he stood looking at her in stupefaction, made her laugh suddenly, and the laughter broke on a note strangely like tears. She sat down upon a crumbling bit of orchard wall, and he knelt beside her. And this time she hid her face in his shoulder, and lay quiet while he kissed the fragrant crown of her hair.

After a few minutes she began to talk to him, in murmur so sweet, and at once so childish and so wise, that everything in the world vanished from his consciousness except that they were together, and that they loved each other. And presently she raised her wet face, and laughed at him through the marvellous velvety brown lashes that were clinging together with tears, and told him that she was "sorry".

An ecstasy of love poured through him; he was as exhausted as she from the storm, and for a long while they were motionless, holding each other close.

"My darling, you kill me when you say things like that!"

She fingered a wave of his hair.

"Like what?"

"Like—what you said—that you were always this way in the beginning!"

"Well, but, Stephen, one *has* had other beaux, you know!"

She was laughing, but he could not even smile.

"Lucretia—please! It makes me so unhappy!"

"Oh, I'm sorry!" The rich bubble of laughter was in her rain-washed voice.

"And that you would marry Fred!" he pursued reproachfully.

"Well, wouldn't that be nice? I would be your little sister——"

"That's—sacrilege!" He kissed the red mouth.

"Then forget that I said it. I'll never say it again!"

Stephen could forget it for these few minutes while he was with her, but the wretchedness of jealousy returned again, after awhile, and again and again. When she was out of his sight he was hungering for her, her words came back to him again and again: "We've had the joy of finding each other—now it will be all pain and trouble!" All the agonies of first, passionate love beset him; her least word would make him unhappy or enchant him for hours.

Everything tended to make his pathway difficult. The Judge's days, if not hours, were numbered. There was a great deal to arrange, Mimi's affairs primarily, a hundred other odds and ends of legal business, and these brought Mimi and Stephen into constant contact. He knew the girl too well not to know exactly what her demure, self-forgetting, affectionate response to his demands meant; Mimi felt that his difficult explanation of his own feeling, to her, on that Sunday afternoon, had been just one of the ordinary exigencies of courtship. She was patient, she was everything sweet and good, but she knew that the irresistible currents of both their lives were steadily bringing them together.

Lucretia felt those currents, too, the unchangeable stream of habit, policy, propinquity, and family loy-

alty that was carrying him slowly away from her. Everything was against them, and sometimes, with humility and discouragement, she longed for the old days again, the very beginnings, when to have Mr. Stephen Winship come to her for a cup of tea and a talk about books was quiet pleasure enough, and when this question of unhappiness and disruption did not haunt her day and night.

"*I*—taking away another woman's lover?" she would ask herself, with a bitter shame at her heart. And a few days after her meeting with Stephen at the cabin on Red Pine, when he came away from the hot city and joined her at Gunther's, she could only show him a mood that moved restlessly between unkindness and despair.

There was none of that first exquisite happiness in this meeting. Lucretia was distressed because everyone at Mrs. Gunther's, she said, would suspect that he came to see her. Everyone knew that there was an understanding between him and Miss Warren and that if he had a mid-week holiday, it should be spent at Warren's Mills.

In vain he tried to soothe her; even his arm, laid across the back of her chair, in the summer-house, annoyed her. The August afternoon was burning hot, the country boarding-house looked tawdry and shabby in the blazing light. Butter was almost liquid on the supper table, and the dry cut bread curled at the edges.

"It makes me feel horrible! It makes me feel as if I were your—well, anything!" Lucretia said, recklessly, when they were walking through hot darkness, after dinner.

Stephen was too tired and too despondent to reply.

"I'm *wretched*—wretched—wretched!" she said angrily.

"I'm sorry!" he said, quietly. He put his arm lightly about her, but she freed herself with a quick movement.

"Please, Steve, it's too hot!" She preceded him in a moody silence for a few minutes, and then burst out, bitterly: "Why should she have it all? The position, the approval of everyone, your uncle and aunt, with Judge Curran's political backing thrown in, to play her game for her? I must be kept out of the way like something shameful—I *am* shameful! You have to fabricate a motive for coming to see me here, you have to destroy my letters, I tell Mrs. Gunther that you are my business man, as an excuse for your calling me on the telephone—you don't write me on your business stationery—you don't dare! But when you are with Mimi—then everything is lovely—everything is approved! You may safely——"

"I can see that there is no use following this line of conversation," Stephen said, deeply displeased. "I am sorry I came up here to-night! I will be at the cabin to-morrow, and I will give everyone a full and fair explanation——"

"Then you will kill your uncle!" said Lucretia.

"—everyone," he repeated, firmly. "It *will* hurt them, and I am sorry!"

"I am sorry we ever met," she said, darkly.

"But, my darling, you wouldn't have wanted never to have realized what we mean to each other?" he pleaded, feeling himself how weak was his dependence upon her smile, and yet unable to bear the anguish of this mood.

"Oh, yes, I would," she answered, lightly. "We

have done a foolish thing, and I suppose we must pay for it! You were engaged to a lovely girl, who will make you a wonderful wife. I had not been six months a widow. We have had a lovely dream——"

It was no use. He could not soften her, could not win her. Fifteen minutes later, with an anger Stephen had not felt stirring within him for actual years, he flung his suit-case into his motor-car, and bid her a brief good-night. No, he could not stay. No, he was going to drive back to the city. No, he had made a mistake in coming, under the impression that she might be glad to see him.

She said good-bye composedly, almost with amusement. Stephen's heart was sick, his teeth were gripped, as he shifted gears and touched keys. She could not—she *could* not—he told himself, let him go in this fashion, sacrifice the whole evening—it was only eight o'clock—and the dewy, fragrant summer morning when she would laugh with him over their breakfast cups!

But she did exactly that, there was no sign of melting in the casual bright farewells. It was in a fever of misery and despair and doubt and anger that Stephen raced the fifty miles between him and his rooms in the old Curran home, and for him the burning night was only a succession of brief sleeps, evil dreams, and wakeful tossing while the whole troubled panorama of his problem unrolled itself before his aching eyes.

The next afternoon he drove to the cabin on Red Pine, still miserably upset and undetermined. If Lucretia loved him, how could she possibly have treated him so cruelly, and if she did not love him, why should he hurt and disappoint his uncle, in the

last few weeks of his life? Marrying Mimi was impossible, of course, but marrying Lucretia sometimes seemed as impossible, too, and Stephen said to himself that he would like to get away from it all, like to make a fresh start in Rio Janeiro or Buenos Aires——

She had lived in Buenos Aires, the beautiful, radiant woman he loved. How marvellous it would be to take her back again some day, to have her leaning beside him on a white railing, while the blue sea and the distant shores of Barbadoes and Pernambuco swept by! But then, what would not be marvellous in that society? And he remembered a day when her maid, Hannah, was out, and when she had given him a late luncheon, cold chicken and wonderful clear iced coffee, and a salad she dressed expertly with chives from a window-box! Even that little reconstructed kitchen, with its gas stove, and its white and blue jars of rice and beans, was Arcadia when she reigned in it.

He reached the cabins on Red Pine still wondering, at the end of a long summer day, and found Mimi on the tennis-court, with Ted Rutger and a strange blonde young man, Marjorie's cousin, Younger Rogers, it appeared. The fourth player in the interrupted game of mixed doubles was tall, and beautifully built, with bright hair under a crushed white hat. She came slowly across the court, as the others greeted him, and gave him her hand, and as he looked into the serious, topaz eyes, he knew, with a great melting and an exquisite warmth at his heart, that for him she was the only woman in the world.

He could see, from Younger Rogers' appraising glance, that he was being judged as Mimi's promised

husband, and as the evening wore on the net tightened slowly and steadily about him. He sat next to Mimi at dinner, and presently she dropped a warm little hand and curled the fingers inside his own. Lucretia was unusually quiet, avoided his look, and never directly addressed him.

The Judge was not so well, the troubling "pains" had returned, he admitted. He looked tired, and shifted his position with difficulty now and then, although he did not complain. Mrs. Curran's spirits were correspondingly affected, and despite their resolute gaiety the young persons felt the gathering trouble in the air. Mimi alone was bright and natural; a pretty Mimi to-night in a gay yellow and black print, with shiny big black cherries bobbing on the calico hat. There was a charming shade of difference in her manner when she turned toward Stephen, a certain becoming deference and affection, a radiant desire to understand the affairs that kept him so busy in town, and to help him.

"Stephen!" It was the voice he loved best in the world. Lucretia came out of the shadows of the porch, and drew him away from the dim flood of light that fell through the open door. It was early evening, and Mimi and the two young men had started for a walk. Stephen had supposed Lucretia with them, and was hurriedly following when she spoke to him. "Steve," she said, urgently, her white-clad figure close to him in the soft gloom, "I was so bad yesterday —will you forgive me?"

Instantly everything resentful, dubious, and angry melted from his heart, and the sunshine of peace flooded it.

"I have been so unhappy!" she said, with a little break in her voice.

His answer was to put his arm about her, and wipe out all the bitterness with one marvellous and dizzying kiss. For a long minute they clung together. About them was only the dark rich fragrance of the mountain night; Stephen could feel the beauty and sweetness of her relaxed in his arms, and everything else in life became shadowy and far away.

"We must follow the others," she whispered, "we have not a minute! But, Steve, I couldn't sleep—I was so wretched! I tossed about for hours——"

"I too!" he said, eagerly. "Ah, you *darling*——"

Their lips were together again.

"We *must* follow them!" Lucretia said, presently. "Steve, you do forgive me?"

"Lucretia, don't——" he said, breathless with the miracle of her mood. "You make me want to cry!"

They went down through the dark garden, and here he made her linger just a moment, for another taste of the first reconciliation that was so sweet. In the room off the dining-room they could see the glimmer of a lamp, where Mrs. Curran was settling her beloved invalid for the night; from the warm darkness of the orchard, odorous of apples, came Mimi's laugh, and young Rogers' hoarse echo.

"And I want you to know why I am here, Steve," Lucretia explained. "This morning Mimi telephoned to me, at the Gunther House, and asked if they could pick me up for a picnic—they were going to the Seven Wells. Steve, I couldn't let them come to Mrs. Gunther's! She—or somebody, would have been sure

to mention the fact that you dined there last night; it's just one of those awkward things——"

He heard her voice break deliciously on a shamed laugh.

"However, I am going to be good!" she assured him, hastily. "No more dramatics. But I couldn't let her come to Mrs. Gunther's—not so soon. So I said that I had promised to take the Bartlett children on a picnic of our own, which was true. 'Well, then,' Mimi said—you know how coaxing she is when she is in earnest about a thing!—'we'll come for you to-night, or we'll come over to-morrow, and that will be even better—we'll bring Steve over with us!' Steve, I couldn't risk that. Mrs. Gunther would have welcomed you as an old friend—we couldn't have kept it secret. So I agreed to the plan for to-night, and they drove into Farley's for me at about four o'clock. I wanted to send you a wire, but I had no chance!"

"It's awkward!" he said, thoughtfully. "I don't know what to do!"

"I do," she answered, sensibly. "We must just wait —we must just be patient."

"Suppose," he suggested, delighted to find her in so quietly helpful a mood, "suppose I tell Mimi the whole truth?"

For a moment she walked beside him in silence.

"Do you think she could keep it from your uncle?" she asked.

"My uncle may live for weeks! Would it matter very much if she did not?"

"I think it would. I think your aunt would be heartbroken."

"Steve— Steve—eee!" It was Mimi's voice, from the orchard. Their moment of confidence was over.

"Coming!" he shouted. He and Lucretia quickened their pace. But before they joined the others, she had time for a last whisper.

"Don't—don't do anything too hastily! We can afford to wait."

CHAPTER XXV

The cruel closing of the long and honorable career of Judge Samuel Curran followed with merciful swiftness. The pains grew worse, and there was communication with doctors again, and there was a last hurried flight to the city. Once again there was a vigil outside the surgery, and this time the broken shell was carefully moved to the Judge's own bedroom at home, not to leave it, as a conscious, breathing man again.

Nobody spoke the terrible word, nobody said anything but what was optimistic and encouraging, but everyone knew—everyone in the house, and the neighborhood, and the city. Mimi's situation lost all its dramatic consolation for her, and she carried herself white and sick; Mrs. Curran moved like a woman under a horrible spell.

Two days—three days—they told callers that he had had coffee, and soup, and even a cigar. The amazing strength of the country boy's constitution asserted itself; he did not die. The effects of the anæsthetics wore away; sometimes he slept; sometimes he talked quietly and rationally with his wife, and Mimi, and his nephews.

One evening, the fourth evening, Stephen was alone with him. The District Attorney was sitting idle, his big arms crossed, his fine, keen gray eyes fixed sternly on the fire. The days had been full of cares

and worries, all made more difficult to bear by the trouble at home, and the dull late summer heat. Affairs in the firm of Winship and Winship appeared confused, and Stephen was not satisfied with Fred's airy allusions to them. To suspect his brother of actual defalcation was impossible, and yet Stephen sensed rather than really suspected that something was wrong, and the immediate anticipation of having all of his own, as well as his uncle's affairs, thrown upon him for reconstruction, might well fill him with apprehension.

Another thing had annoyed him disproportionately to-day. A certain scurrilous little evening sheet, *The Commerce News*, had lately sprung into being, backed, as all the political world knew, by his party's opponents, at the head of whom was Frank Reilly, the coroner.

Reilly had resented certain actions of Stephen in regard to clearing up the recent gangster trouble that had shocked and frightened all Sanbridge, and the two were recognized opponents now, pitted against each other quite openly, for the coming party conventions. *The Commerce News* had before this attacked the District Attorney, and Stephen could have found his name in any day's issue, connected with such sarcasms as "virtuous and impeccable," "our pure and stainless friend from Bond Street," or "Sanbridge's Boy Galahad."

But to-day there had been a more personal note. Under a scathing editorial headed "Mr. District Attorney, Please Explain?" he had found a veiled allusion to a certain beautiful widow of Kingsgreen Square, and the death of her husband from an overdose of medicine some months before. How long had Mr. Stephen

Winship known this charming woman before he so readily assured the coroner that she was an old friend, that he would be answerable for the case? According to the testimony of one Bertha Hansen, lately employed by the beautiful widow in question, Mr. Stephen Winship had been in the house for the first time that night, arriving only a hour or two before Mr. Frank Reilly. The circumstances of the call and the friendship might be interesting to Mr. Winship's constituents. How about it, Mr. Winship?

The thing was contemptible, of course; the shrill yelping of a terrier upon whose paw a casual passing foot has fallen. Everyone knew exactly what sort of a man Reilly was, exactly how Stephen Winship had harried him and exposed him. But the opposition might take up this infamous insinuation, and play upon it. It might be difficult to shut Reilly's mouth. And it meant that his seeing Lucretia again was impossible at the moment. He wrote her instantly at the Gunther House upon seeing the paper, advising her resolutely to ignore it, and assuring her that there could be no more unpleasant result than the ugliness of having her identity, as the unnamed woman of the editorial, suspected. Even that was not probable, to any wide extent, at least.

Stephen, in the quiet bedroom, looked at the lightly sleeping invalid. In a day or two Uncle Sam would be gone, and then he would be free—freer, at least, to move. Then he could explain the situation to Mimi, break the second blow to poor Aunt Bessy while she was still numb and dazed from the first, and make immediate arrangements with Lucretia.

His uncle's head was in a comfortable position, he

lay flat on his back. Doctor Sayre had told them that the end might come in any one of these dozes, and old Samuel Curran knew himself, now, that there was no further hope of life. He had received the answer to his definite question quietly, reaching an emaciated hand for his wife's hand, whispering that he was only sorry for Bessy. He lay now in that curious borderland between the reality of the bedroom and the equally near reality of the other world within the world he knew. Sometimes he whispered to himself those all-important detached words so casually dismissed by sick-room watchers as "wandering"; sometimes he addressed a murmured greeting to his mother, or some other beloved spirit who had taken this road years ago, and Mrs. Curran would cry afresh at hearing the names of Mimi's young father and mother, or the Judge's sister Emily whose death was fifty years past, as a little girl of eighteen.

"Steve!" the dying man said, bewilderedly and suddenly, out of a silence. Stephen bent toward him, his chair was so close that this brought his face near to the bloodless old face. The Judge had turned slightly on his pillow, his eyes were a little puzzled, but he was faintly smiling. "Your grandfather was a fine man, my boy."

"I know it!" Stephen said, gently.

"If he comes in again, Steve, I want you to speak to him!" his uncle suggested, mildly.

"I—yes, I will, Uncle Sam."

"Never had but three children, your mother and Emmy and me," mused the Judge. "Coffee ducks! We'd go into the dining-room—my grandfather, Captain Tom, was alive then,—and my father would

dip sugar into his coffee, and give it to little Fanny, and call it a 'coffee duck!'"

He dozed, and there was silence in the room. It was but dimly lighted, the big windows were wide open to catch any drift of cooler air that might be moving in the summer night. Mrs. Curran, exhausted with fear and strain, was sleeping; Mimi was downstairs; the house, the street, the city itself, were still.

"Mrs. Lombard was with him, Steve—with your grandfather, I mean," the dying man said, his eyes wide open again. "Extremely pretty woman! I appreciate——" His voice faded. "I appreciate her coming here with your grandfather. Her name is Grace——

"Mimi doesn't call her Grace?" he added, anxiously, "What does she call her?"

Stephen cleared his throat.

"Lucretia—her name is Lucretia," he said.

"I thought her name was Grace," the Judge said, dreamily serene again. "Steve——"

"Sir?" Stephen was all attention, but the invalid drowsed lightly again. Presently he opened his eyes, and said, quietly and naturally:

"You're in love with her, eh?"

"With——?" Stephen's throat thickened, and the blood came into his face.

"I was on the porch Saturday night," his uncle told him. "I was sitting there in the dark, waiting for Bessy to get my bed ready, when you and Mrs. Lombard came out. You love her, do you?

"My father had an unhappy love affair, Steve," the old man added, as Stephen did not speak. "I never saw the girl—she was a Maryland girl. He

visited down there, and she broke his heart! But he came back here, and he got over it, and he married the girl who had loved him all his life—my mother. They had children, and a lovely home, friends—he was a famous doctor in his day, Steve. When my turn came, I fell in love with the wrong woman, too. She was a young actress—or I thought she was young. My father talked to me then, he told me about this Baltimore girl, how young she had been, how soon she married another man. She had just bewitched him, my boy, as the actress did me, and as this young woman does you. I came back to Bessy, and I told her the truth. And years afterward, when she and I were in Boston, we saw my first love on the stage, in a small part, and—well, the play bored me so that I went to sleep!"

Stephen was still silent, looking gravely down at the colorless shell of a hand that he held between his two hands.

"Jim Warren was a fine man, Steve," the shadowy voice resumed, after a moment. "And Mary Warren was one of the best women I have ever known. Their little girl is going to make a splendid wife, my boy—I've watched her all her life; I *know*. She's fond of you——"

He shut his eyes, the long speech had tired him. Stephen, smitten, was voiceless and motionless, except for the thumb with which he gently rubbed the old hand.

"You asked her, Steve," the Judge said, with sudden, unexpected vigor, "you asked her, before you began following these—these false gods. You've always been a quiet fellow—almost too old for your years. Bessy

and I have said so a hundred times! Now, just when your wife and your home and your party are all looking toward you—now you fall in love, like a High School boy, with a pretty face!"

"It—it isn't quite that, Uncle Sam!"

"Steve, I believe in you," the old voice said. "I've staked more on you than you know. The party needs you, the boys want you to belong to Sanbridge, to take your right place here. Lots of those old timers knew Jim Warren, and with his little girl your wife——

"Why, what do you know of this other woman?" he broke off, pleadingly. "She's pretty—we all know that. But what else? She never set her foot in the city until two years ago. You don't know that she could ever be happy here. You don't know what her traditions are, what sort of people she comes from. It's not money—I'm not talking about money! But it's everything that counts—friends, family, associations of every sort. She may be everything that is good, and yet not want to settle down in a small American city, and raise your children!

"I'm pretty near to the end of the road, Steve. My boy, it would make it all easier for me, it would make me very happy, to feel that Bessy and Mimi had you back of them, carrying them through this time—it'll be a hard, strange time for Bessy, and the little girl will need you at every turn! If you and my little Mimi could be married here in my 'room—some time before the summons comes for the old man——?"

He was silent, and for a long while Stephen was silent, too, looking down at the hand he held, his fine face dark and troubled.

"I—I've told her that I care for her, Uncle Sam!"

"Well——" said the voiceless whisper, eagerly. "You mustn't take that too seriously, my boy. She's been married once; she'll marry again. I don't dislike her, Steve. But—she's not been widowed a year. Fred admires her. I don't know how seriously, but she encourages him to a certain extent, anyway. Does that look like a deep nature, Steve? In any case, is it the woman for you? Can you compare that sort of a woman to the girl who has loved you since she was ten years old?"

"I don't know why you say she likes Fred," Stephen said, sick with a writhing pang of pure jealousy.

"Well, the boy's there a good deal, when she's in the city. But she'd console herself, he tells me, Steve —that's what I mean. She'd be off to England, or France—she's lived everywhere, it seems."

Off to England or France! The desolating possibility chilled him. His heart was sick with doubt and fear and pain.

"You like Mimi?" the Judge asked, as he sat thinking.

"Oh, I love Mimi, of course!"

"Well, then——!" The words died away triumphantly into a long silence. The Judge's eyes, unearthly bright, watched the young man's face eagerly.

"Uncle Sam, I'll think about it!" Stephen said at last, reluctantly. "I'll talk to you to-morrow. It's eleven o'clock now; perhaps I can get in touch with—with Lucretia to-morrow, and then talk to Mimi. I will tell her the whole thing, and if she—— Of course, Mimi may not be willing, under the circumstances!"

"Why tell her?" asked the Judge, into whose waxen

face the light of utter peace had crept. "They'll be grieved, Stephen. Everything will be upset. She won't be critical of you, my boy. She will wait until you can give her the deepest love there is in you. And it will come, Steve," he added, with conviction. "I'm an old man, I know what I am saying. It will come!"

Stephen made no answer; none was needed. With a smile and a long breath his uncle relaxed his white head against the pillow, and again he slept. The younger man sat motionless beside him, still holding the cool hand in his own brown, big ones.

CHAPTER XXVI

At midnight the nurse crept in, with the Judge's hot gruel, and Mrs. Curran appeared, her wrinkled, soft, puffy face blotched with sleep. Stephen went noiselessly into the hall, encountering a roused and curious Mimi at her doorway in a trailing blue wrapper.

"Everything as usual, Steve?"

"Quite. He's taking his gruel. Go back to bed and get your sleep!"

"I had a horrible dream!" Mimi said, childishly, curling one little fur-slippered foot above the other.

"Fred home?" Stephen asked, smiling at her, and conscious of a sharp touch of headache.

"I haven't heard him come in. He can't be still at Lucretia's. It's after midnight!"

"At Lucretia's! Is she in town?"

"Why, yes." Mimi smiled, sleepily, and smothered a yawn. "I didn't know it," she said. "But she telephoned at about nine o'clock, and of course he raced down there."

"But——" Stephen paused. "But I telephoned her at two o'clock, and she said nothing of coming in!" was on his lips. For obvious reasons he suppressed the remark. There was a strange, sickening pain stirring at the bottom of his heart. "Did—did she ask for me?" he said.

"As a matter of fact, she acted rather queer," Mimi said, simply. "Emma came in and said someone was

on the telephone for Fred, and wouldn't give any name, but it was a lady's voice. I heard him talking to her, rather low and quick, I thought, and finally he said, 'All right, Lucretia!' so then I knew. But he didn't tell *me*, just grabbed his hat and flew!"

"Funny!" But as Stephen slowly went upstairs, and slowly undressed, he felt no sense of fun. His brain worked busily and tirelessly at the question: how could she possibly have come to town without letting him know? She must have known at two o'clock that she was coming, the train left Farley's at four, and the omnibus from Gunther's an hour before that!

Were there any conceivable circumstances under which he could have kept this information from her, had the situation been reversed? No matter what her errand, wouldn't the only natural thing be to notify him, to arrange for just a moment's meeting, if more were impossible?

"No—no—no—I simply couldn't have done it. There is *no* reason, there is *no* excuse!" he said, feverishly, shutting his book at one o'clock.

He went to the door that opened into Fred's bedroom; the room was empty.

"Unless she really does like half-a-dozen men as well as she does me!" he decided, bitterly. And he remembered her putting him off, her unreasonable jealousies, her airy comment that there was plenty of time.

"Fred *can't* still be there, that's nonsense!" he told himself, dressing busily, hardly conscious of what he did. In a sort of frenzy he laced his shoes and jerked on his coat. He went silently and quickly down the stairs, out toward the garage.

A light car was coming down the hot, dark street. Fred!—he thought. But it was not Fred.

Stephen's heart and brain were on fire. Where *was* Fred? He had no business to desert them all at this time! Aunt Bessy might need him at any moment——

He got into his own car. He would drive past Lucretia's house, and then try to pick up Fred at the club. Anyway, he must have air, he must have silence and solitude in which to think, to-night. Everything in his life seemed to have been torn up by the roots. A mysterious, strange woman!—that was what the world thought of his living, glowing, radiant Lucretia. They—people who didn't know her—they didn't trust her, or like her.

Kingsgreen Square. He looked up at her window, and his blood stopped moving. There was a light.

Stephen stopped his car in the shadows of the park opposite. An icy, bitter, death-like sadness seized him. His throat was dry, and his hands cold. A light—at twenty minutes past one.

Perhaps some distinguished friend of hers had come to town, perhaps she was entertaining. But the only car at her door was Fred's little car. A mysterious, strange woman! They didn't believe in her.

The summer night was dry and warm, with an occasional restless breeze tossing the heavy foliage of the sycamores and maples that waved their high branches over Kingsgreen Square. Stephen sat still in his car, watching the dim light in the sitting-room of the old rectory, his folded arms moving with the violent motion of his breath.

She might have tried to telephone him, it would have been as simple to have asked Emma for himself

as for Fred. There was no consolation there, there was no explanation anywhere. Why had she not told him this afternoon that she was coming down? Or why had she not stopped at the office; she was quite ready enough, usually, with the excuse of "business."

He interrupted his own thoughts, ashamed. Excuses and pretence were foreign enough to his real nature. He loathed anything like misrepresentation and deceit. Lucretia's quick evasions and adaptations of the truth seemed to him always deplorable, and to-night actually distasteful, repellent.

He was suddenly roused from his revery by seeing the street doorway noiselessly opened. A man came quietly out, and crossed under the old street lamp. It was Fred.

He went to his car, and jumped in; Stephen heard the engine buzz, and a moment later Fred was gone. The light in the sitting-room went out abruptly, and a moment later a square of gold radiance fell upon the old brick walls of St. Thomas' from the bedroom window.

Stephen sat there until that light was extinguished, too; his heart a whirlpool of wretched jealousy and doubt. There must be some explanation—there was no explanation, he told himself, over and over again. There must be some explanation—there was no explanation.

After awhile he drove home, slowly. But when the car was beside Fred's car in the garage, he still did not go in to bed. He hung on the old fence, beside the stable, thinking, thinking, thinking.

He was tired, tired almost to fever. Nothing could be thought out to a conclusion; it was all a hopeless

troubled jumble—Mimi, Lucretia, Fred, Aunt Bessy and Uncle Sam.

The sky darkened ominously; paled as if a black glass had been noiselessly lifted from across it. The great trees on the old Curran place were gray against darker gray; the angle of the barn roof etched itself against the twilight. A wandering breeze went by fragrant of hay and roses. There were a few minutes of exquisite chill.

Stephen went noiselessly into the dark house, which smelled closed and stuffy. He stumbled and yawned over getting to bed, and at once fell into a deep sleep. It was bright morning when he opened his eyes again.

Bright morning, and Fred cautiously and silently equipping himself for the office, slipping keys and watch into his pockets, eyes alertly watching the bed.

"Waked you, Steve!" Fred said, with self-reproach.

Stephen turned over, smiling vaguely, conscious deep in his being of something unpleasant, but unable to think yet.

"I was trying not to wake you!" Fred said. "You were late last night."

"You were late, too," Stephen said, memory coming back in a tide.

"Sat in a game with the fellers," Fred stated, casually.

"I see!"

"Say, Steve, would it put you out much if I went down to New York this afternoon?" Fred asked, carelessly. "I've got a little business there——"

"What sort of business?"

"I'll tell you when I put it over!" Fred answered, consulting his watch with an abstracted frown. "I thought I'd go down on the twelve o'clock train, and get the eight o'clock flyer back to-morrow morning."

"Sure. Go ahead!" Stephen said, lifelessly, after a pause.

Fool—fool—fool that he had been! he said to himself, when his brother had gone. He reached for the telephone, and called the rectory.

It was Hannah who answered him, and he knew that her innocent negatives were being whispered to her by Lucretia herself.

No, Mrs. Lombard wasn't there, she was up at the Gunther House. No, sir; she hadn't been in town this week. No, sir; no, sir.

Stephen persisted. Suddenly, with a breath of laughter and a swish of silk, it was Lucretia herself at the telephone. What did he mean by making Hannah and herself tell such lies? Yes, of course she was down. Well, she *had* tried to telephone him. Well, he must not be so suspicious!

Her gaiety, the unconcerned, childishly musing notes in her voice, strained the last nervous shreds of his self-control. He could have cried with weariness and despair at her cheerful unconsciousness that she had hurt him bitterly.

"Can—it's ten o'clock now—can I see you to-day? Could you lunch with me?"

"Oh, Stephen, ought you? Your uncle, you know—just now——"

"I could manage it very nicely. He is just the same—no immediate change."

"Well, but not to-day. Suppose I—suppose I telephone you in the morning?"

He realized, with a sick heart, that she was fencing.

"In the morning! Aren't you going back to Gunther's to-day?"

"Well—yes, of course I am! How foolish of me! But I don't seem to have my senses this morning! Yes, of course. But I'll telephone you, Steve; that's best. I'll telephone you after lunch. You'll be in your office then?" He could tell from her tone that she was trying to extricate herself from a most unwelcome interruption. He ended the conversation abruptly.

At noon, in his office, an agony of doubt suddenly seized him. He telephoned the rectory again. This time Hannah was quite obviously alone, and could speak freely.

"She left just a few minutes ago, Mr. Winship, with your brother. No, sir; I don't think she was going back to the country, I think it was business that took her to New York—the noon train, she said. She——"

So that ended it. Stephen sat moving the little bronze elephant Mimi had given him for a paper-weight, slowly to and fro. On to the brown blotter, off the blotter to the glass that shielded the mahogany. Back and forth, back and forth, while the insistent noon whistles shrilled and whined in the hot city. Whatever had taken her to New York was not important, whatever had kept Fred and herself talking from half-past nine until after one o'clock last night was not important, except to him. She was her own mistress.

But to him, this proof that she neither trusted him nor needed him was all-important. His uncle's words came back to him:

"She's not been widowed six months yet; does that look like a very deep feeling?"

He went home at five o'clock; the house seemed deliciously cool and airy to-night, and while he sat

grimed and weary from the crowded day's strain, beside the invalid's bed, Mimi came in, with a frosted glass of something for him to drink, and took her place quietly beside Aunt Bessy.

She wore a frail almost transparant dress of striped dark blue and white, her dark hair was freshly brushed. Stephen watched her gratefully; she had sunk all her own personality in the needs of this stricken household; she had her own dear, merry smile for the old Judge, her comforting hand held Mrs. Curran's tightly, she flitted to the door to speak to a maid or answer a telephone inquiry.

Duty, sweetness, and the setting of these dignified rooms, these dignified old guardians, how well they became her! What a little gentlewoman she was, rising to this demand as simply as she would rise to every other. Her earnest eyes soothed his hurt and humiliated soul, her pleasant familiarity with him, the motherly little fashion she had of scolding and directing him, seemed to him lovely to-night.

It solved everything—his marriage to Mimi. It meant his duty to his party, his family, and to this delightful woman whom he had watched grow up from lovely babyhood. It meant an old man's death in peace, and an old woman's surest consolation in incurable loss and sorrow.

"Mimi," he said to her, after dinner, "I want to speak to you a moment!"

She followed him into the library.

"I've overdrawn!" she said, smilingly, as she had often said before. But when they were alone in the cool, leather-scented room, she came close to him, and added, anxiously, "He's worse!"

Her simplicity went to his heart, and he took both her hands.

"No, dear; he's just the same. But I want to talk to you frankly, Mimi, and have you help me!"

"Steve, as if I could help you? That's *your* rôle!"

"Mimi," he began with difficulty, "All my life I have felt that some day you and I would be married——"

"Yes, I know!" she whispered, smiling, but suddenly pale.

"You never knew, Mimi, that there was—another woman?" Stephen asked, slowly.

"Steve!" Her eyes blazed; she stared at him horrified. "But—but not *you!*"

He read her mistake in her tone, and flushed uncomfortably.

"No, I don't mean that! There has never been that—that sort of thing in my life!"

"But—what then?" she said, wondering.

"I cared for her," he said, simply. "I told her so. And I tried to tell you so!"

She was still staring at him, bewilderedly.

"I remember! That Sunday afternoon at Red Pine!" she said, struck. "But, Steve—she isn't free?" she asked.

"Yes. She's free."

"She——" Mimi was almost indignant. "She doesn't like you?" she went on, wide-eyed.

"No; it's not that!"

Mimi was motionless, her bright eyes fixed upon him.

"But what is it, then?"

"Might it be," he said, slowly, "that you are closer to me, that I know you better—know better what my life would be with you? There are a thousand reasons

for my loving you, Mimi, and but the one for loving her!"

"What is that one?" Mimi asked, soberly, after thought.

"That—that I find her—found her—strangely attractive!" he said, puzzled himself for the right words.

"You love her best, but you come to me!" Mimi said, out of a troubled silence, and with bitter pain in her voice.

"I wish I had never seen her!" Stephen said.

The girl glanced at him timidly, the unhappy, heavy tone of his voice making her forget her own sense of hurt and shame.

He could not know that she had visualized a youthful affair, mad and miserable, an unscrupulous and flirtatious woman, who had wounded and disillusioned this simplest, most helpless, dearest of men. An impulse almost wifely in its love and protection rose strongly within her. He was so different, so blundering and so innocent, in a woman's hands!

"We know each other so well," he said, with almost a little-boy awkwardness. "You know my faults—and I know that you haven't any! There isn't anything about you that I don't admire—and love!"

Mimi felt stinging tears behind her eyes; she turned away.

"Ah, Stevie dear," she said, desolately, "that isn't enough! You must see that I can't do that!"

There was a long silence between them.

"Yes, I do see that, dear," the man said, quietly, then.

Mimi whirled about to face him, and he saw that she was in tears.

"Not for my sake, Steve, for yours!" she said, thickly, trying gallantly to smile.

But her resistance was almost at an end, she had always loved him, she could not let him go away from her. When he put his arm about her, she dropped her face against his shoulder, and clung to him.

"Mimi," he said, hesitating and distressed, "I know that nothing is right that separates you and me after all these years!"

The dark head on his shoulder was motionless; he began to stroke her hair.

"Uncle Sam wishes it, immediately," he said, in a troubled voice. Mimi's wet eyes flashed into view, her voice was terrified.

"Then he's worse!"

"No; but he is worrying about it."

Stephen had meant only to reassure her; he could hardly have chosen a more fortunate phrase.

"But he mustn't worry! Doctor Sayre said so. We must—we must——"

She hesitated, clinging to his hand. In the gipsyish face he knew so well an April battle was clouding and shining.

"Steve, you wouldn't ask me if it was not the right, wise thing——!"

He drew her toward him.

"Mimi, dear, with God's help I will make you the happiest wife in all the world!"

The magic word won his case for him; she came into his arms, and with all her earnest, trusting girl's heart in her voice and eyes, she said, with the warmest kiss she had ever given him:

"Ah, Steve, dear, as if I didn't know *you!*"

CHAPTER XXVII

Two days later Stephen Winship stopped his car at the curb before the old rectory in Kingsgreen Square. A burning August morning had laid a fine blue haze over the city; there were forest fires far to the north, and in the direction the sky showed, even from here, a heavy yellow-gray. There was no shadow anywhere; the foliage of the trees hung limp in the damp hot air. The little fishstall was closed; the butcher's window empty except a sleeping great cat; Monsieur Lejeal had retired into some dim lair in the deeps of the bookshop, and the sun beat down upon discolored magazines and stained green cloth bindings unchecked.

Stephen mounted the stairs. Hannah, her kindly face damp and dark with heat, showed him into the familiar sitting-room, and disappeared into her own region. Mrs. Lombard would only be a moment, she said.

The room wore its summer aspect to-day; the chairs were in Holland covers; there were roses on the piano, and through the old-fashioned Italian blinds at the windows sunshine fell in misty gold bars, making the light dim and charming, like summer sunlight through high, intercrossed cathedral naves or streaming in rifts through the branches of forest trees. The evidences of a woman's occupancy here, the occupancy of a lovely and resourceful woman, had always been peculiarly appealing to Stephen; to-day he noted again

her books in various languages, her Russian and German music, the desk from which she sent him her distinguished, brief notes, the sweet, homelike order and spaciousness that she had somehow achieved in this old-fashioned place. Almost all the cluttering detail of her husband's day was gone, the photographs and nicknacks, but she had managed the change gradually, with no vulgar rush for paperers and mahogany.

It was the room of a poised and finished woman of the world, a woman who expected to be valued for what she was rather than what she had, who was quite confident of being able to hold her own in any environment, on her own terms.

Stephen seemed to sense this especially to-day, and as he waited in this grateful quiet and peace, his head, which was aching with the heat and hurry of the morning, eased itself by appreciable degrees, and his mind began to grasp the events of the last few days in something like their proper significance.

The die was cast now. He was glad of it. He was glad of it. It only remained to face this difficult next half-hour with what dignity and consideration he might; afterward, everything would be quite simple.

He glanced at the bedroom door, and sighed impatiently. It was harder every minute to wait for her here, and to feel her influence and her charm steal over him again, the heady excitement of only being near her, and the thrilling sense that nothing else in the world counted in his life except Lucretia. Stephen frowned faintly, and caught his lower lip in his teeth. He felt inexpressibly tired; he would have liked to drop into one of these big chairs, and put his head back, and close his eyes to all this shimmering, shaded greenness, and sleep.

She came suddenly, a flash of white and gold and tawny browns, with the fragrance of scented waters and powders hanging faintly about her. The jalousies clicked as the door opened, a faint breeze crossed the room; she was close beside him, more exquisite than he had ever seen her; her velvety skin touched with a warm bloom under its tan, her topaz eyes seeming to shed an actual starry radiance in the tempered light.

"Stephen! You got my note?"

"I have it here."

"And were you surprised? I waked up in New York this morning," Lucretia said, joyfully. "I had expected to come back last night, at eight, but I was detained. My darling, you look tired. How is the Judge?"

"Sinking. Unconscious, now, most of the time." Stephen cleared his throat, which felt dry.

"I sent for you," said Lucretia, with sympathy in her eyes. "But sit down! I have so much to tell you!"

"You said in the note something important about Fred," he prompted her. "We have been wondering where he was. He—was he—did you see him in New York?"

"Yes. But sit down!"

Fragrant, eager, she put the two fine hands, in their transparent, buttoned cuffs, against him, and gently pushed him into a chair. And immediately, with the frail white skirts ballooning about her like the petals of a rose, and falling softly and limply into place as she sat down, she took a low hassock at his knee, and possessed herself of both his hands.

"Steve, dear," she said, in the ready velvet voice,

"I've felt so badly, I've felt such a hypocrite about something, all this week. But now I can tell you, and I want you to know!"

A sick desolation swept over the man's soul. It was all gone, the doubt and distrust and anger, and all the world was here, in this room, held between these two smooth, tawny-brown hands. For good or evil, she was the only woman in his life, and the claims of Mimi, his uncle, his career, were not real—not to be considered—only a troubled background to his distressed thoughts.

"This was it, you see," Lucretia was explaining. "Fred—but did Fred tell you that I was here in town night before last?" she broke off to ask, animatedly. "Well, I was. But this was what happened. The other day, just after you telephoned me, I had a telephone call from Fred. This was up at Gunther's, of course. He said that he was in trouble—couldn't tell you——"

"*Fred* was?"

Stephen's tone was amazed, her own eyes grew round and serious.

"Oh, my dear, and I assure you the words were nothing to the *tone!* It sounded suicidal, really. I asked him to come up to me at once; he said he dared not leave the office——"

"*Dared* not!"

"That's what he said. So of course I said I would come down. I came in on the late train—got here about nine, and found Hannah here with her little girl. I telephoned your house—but I didn't give my name, and Fred came here at once." Lucretia's voice faltered, and she smiled at Stephen with something of the bashful daring of a little girl. "Fred

wants me to tell you this, Steve," she said, "and you must not be cross. I've loaned him money!"

The blood came into Stephen's face, and he looked at her in stupefaction.

"I've loaned him," added Lucretia, still with that whimsical look of little-girl soberness, "twelve thousand dollars!"

"You—I hope to God you are joking!" Stephen said, frowning.

"Indeed I am not joking. Fred—borrowed some securities from the safe, a long time ago, three or four years," Lucretia explained, with a sudden change of voice and manner, to even deeper gentleness and gravity. "He felt—he feels—well, frightfully about it. I don't think Fred was afraid of anything serious, Steve. He knows how unlikely Mimi—the bonds were hers—would be to make trouble. It was because of your engagement to Mimi that I first heard all this. Fred knew that when your uncle died, and you took over her affairs, he *must* be discovered. I don't know what the original manipulation was for—speculation pure and simple, he thought he could play that game! But the truth was that he lost more than ten thousand dollars."

"*Fred!*"

Stephen said no more. There was agony in the monosyllable, and he buried his head in his hands.

"Do you think that he didn't feel that, too?" she said, eagerly, reading the tone aright. "It wasn't anything else Fred feared, it was *you*. His heart was broken, Steve. He's tried hard, for Fred, all these years, to show you how much he appreciates all you've done! He's lost more trying to get the first money

back. He *isn't* a good business man, Steve, but he does love you with all his heart."

Her pleading, vibrant voice died away upon utter silence; she sat back upon her hassock, watching the bowed head, and the fine gripping fingers, with sympathetic tears in her eyes.

"Fred had a chance, two weeks ago, to go with the new rubber company to Buenos Aires next month, for two years," Lucretia presently continued. Stephen, struck afresh by her words, looked up, with a haggard face, dropped his head again. "Atkins, who was getting up the company, asked him," she said, "and—you know Fred!—you know how he has longed for such a chance. And he has been so different, Steve—Fred's grown up lately. What he did, years ago, was what many and many a young man does—in the family, as it were—— He wants a fresh start, he hates Sanbridge, and in the excitement and interest of the new place——

"But he couldn't leave you here, with your uncle's affairs, and Mimi's, and this deficiency at the office to be discovered——"

Again her voice died away against his unbroken silence, and she laid her hand upon his bowed shoulders tenderly.

"Steve, please—just tell me that you know we did this because we wanted to spare you!"

"I—yes, of course I believe that!" he said, incoherently. He glanced up, looking about feverishly, as if he sought air. "I—my God, how blind a man can be!" he muttered. "Fred! *Fred!*"

"Steve, was that any more than thousands and thousands of good men have done when they were

boys? Be reasonable, dear. He did the thing on a silly, weak impulse. But he has always regarded Mimi as a sister—to touch her money, especially in the hope of increasing it, seemed just a sort of adventure. Remember what a boy he is!"

"Not too boyish to come and borrow money from a woman!" Stephen observed, bitterly.

"I offered it, Steve. At least, I remembered my pearls, down in a safe-deposit box in New York! He and I went down there, day before yesterday, got them out, carried them to Tiffany's, and they sent us to a loan society in lower Broadway, and there they offered me three times as much as I wanted! I made it exactly twelve thousand. I gave it to Fred, and we came up on the eight o'clock train this morning. He went down to the office to attend to matters connected with this affair—have you been there? So everything is all right to-day," she finished, triumphantly, "and some day when you and I are frightfully prosperous we will get the pearls back——"

Suddenly she was on her knees beside him on the floor, as he had so often knelt beside her, and she lifted his arms, and made them clasp her.

"Steve, when it's all over, won't it seem a miracle," she said, "to have all the problems of Fred and Mimi and your uncle swept away, and the political fight ended one way or another, and Reilly's insinuations a thing of the past——"

"Lucretia—Lucretia—Lucretia!" he said, with a sort of half-groan, flinging his arms about her, and straining her to him with a force almost violent. "My darling—my *heart!* We are too late!"

She had laid her fragrant smooth cheek against

his, but in the silence after he spoke she drew away, and studied him with puzzled rather than anxious eyes.

"How do you mean?"

"My uncle asked it," Stephen said, thickly, and with a dry throat. "I thought—I thought Fred cared for you——"

"Fred *does* care for me," Lucretia answered, roundly, with wide, stern eyes fixed upon him. "But what has that to do with you and me?"

Without answering he got to his feet, his fine face dark with pain, and leaned against the low mantel, his forehead resting upon his hand. Lucretia watched him uneasily.

"Steve, what *is* it?"

"Mimi and I," he answered, slowly, "were married an hour ago. I am taking her to New York to-night. It was only because there were some matters at the office that I had to attend to, and that you said in your note that you had news of Fred——"

"But what are you saying?" Lucretia said, dazed eyes on his face, her tone puzzled, protestant, almost faintly amused. She came to him, and took the lapels of his coat into her two hands. "What are you saying, Steve?" she asked.

"I—I mean it."

"You're joking!" She walked away, flung herself and her thin white ruffles into a basket chair. "But what a joke!" he heard her whisper, her arms fallen limp, her eyes staring.

"I—God help us!" Stephen said, abruptly.

The phrase brought into her face the first trace of real apprehension.

"What did you say?" she asked, in a voice suddenly

deep. "But of course you are punishing me," she added, beginning to breathe hard, and trying to glance about her with a natural air. "Of course you must frighten me for keeping this from you! Steve," she broke off, in her most exquisite tones, getting up to come to him, and smiling like a pleading child into his face, "my sweetheart, my own dear Steve, don't frighten me! I've had so much to bear—let me be happy now. Put your arms about me, and tell me that we may have just this hour of thinking what life is going to be to us—the travel, the work, the friends—your career! I'm sorry if I made you angry about Fred, but he turned to me, and it was so sweet to me to feel that I could help him, and that I could do something for you—— The clouds are all gone now! We'll redeem the pearls out of your first big fee, Steve, and in a few years the people of Sanbridge will forget that Judge Winship's wife—that Senator Winship's wife—wasn't born and brought up here! And Mimi'll be our close friend, dear—you'll see how easily I win her, and some day our children and hers will be friends!"

The flood-tide of sweetness and loveliness lifted him off his feet, he felt as if he were drowning in utter ecstasy and peace. And beneath all the joy, underlining and emphasizing it, was an agony of pain so acute that he knew he must die when once he felt it beginning to creep about him. Ah, if she had once taken this note before, in all these troubled weeks, if she had shown him this girlish, simple, loving Lucretia, with her fair hair crushed over so innocent and candid a brow, with her young exquisite face like a book—all goodness and devotion, for him to read.

How beautiful she was, in the plain familiar white frock, the rounded figure was exquisite in every pose, the topaz eyes a miracle of light whether they flashed with fire or, as now, melted into gold. He thought of her as his wife, meeting him at the door, coming in furred and rosy and veiled from shopping trips, watching him across the dinner table, all the beauty of soul and mind and body, *his*——

"Lucretia, I'm sorry. I've—I've nothing to say. Make it as easy as you can for me, for God's sake. We—Mimi and I—were married by Bishop Reynolds at ten o'clock!"

This time she believed him. The color drained slowly out of her face, and as she stood, looking fixedly at him, he saw her breast rise and fall once, stormily, and that the muscles of her white throat moved spasmodically, as if she were conscious of choking.

"I see," she said, quickly and lightly, in a dead silence. "Your uncle wished it, of course! I—I—of course!" Her voice shook, and her glance wandered aimlessly; she was making the one supreme effort of her life to maintain her self-control. "I—thought you were joking, Steve!" she whispered. A little flicker of her nostril, and the sudden pressing together of her lips showed how close was the storm. But she still fought it resolutely. "Now you must go, it's noon," she said, hurriedly. "And you must believe that I—I understand. I shouldn't have—shouldn't have come into your life, and Mimi's—God knows I wouldn't have done so, knowing. No—no—no," she added in an undertone, as if to herself, "I wouldn't have done that! I will see you both—when I come back——"

Her phrases were staggering wildly. She lumped them, as it were, in one last hasty good-bye.

"You must go now; I am going back to Gunther's this afternoon. And after a week or so I am going away—I don't know where. But meanwhile, God bless you, dear——"

"Look here!" He struck down the hand she held out for a farewell, and caught the whole woman in his arms, speaking to her hoarsely and gratingly, his hot breath close upon her shut eyelids. As he looked down upon her a tear slipped free, her lips were trembling, and she held them pressed tightly together. "Lucretia—Lucretia!" he said. "That you care—this way! I never dreamed it! I thought that you were playing with me—that you *couldn't* suffer as I was suffering—that I was hurting them all—making a fool of myself——!"

She freed herself, and for a full minute of silence they stood panting, and facing each other.

"You *dared* to think that!" Lucretia said then, in a whisper. "You dared to doubt what I had told you!"

In one terrible moment of self-contempt Stephen saw what he had made of his life, and his head drooped, and he made no answer.

"You dared to take that girl, to please her, and your family, and your constituents," Lucreta said, in splendid scorn. "And you will take her to New York tonight, and introduce her to the world as your wife—loving *me!* You dare? And I am yours, and you are mine, by God's law," she went on, restlessly moving and turning, knotting her fingers, pressing them to her face, sometimes resting her elbows on the mantel,

and clasping her hands high above her lowered head, sometimes pressing both hands to her heart. "We love each other—if there is such a thing as love in the world! It made life over to me—every twig, every sunset and sunrise was different, because it made me think of you! Why, to wake up was heaven—this summer, and every night, when the moonlight came into my room. Oh, Steve, wasn't myself enough? Wasn't it enough that you were my world—that I longed for the hour that would have made me your wife, that I longed for the years ahead—all the years! God, I wonder why I have to suffer so!"

In her mad moving about she had flung herself into a chair at the table, and had run the fingers of both hands deep into the magnificent hair. When she suddenly got to her feet, and came back to the hearth the glory of the tawny-brown masses was loosened, and tumbled back, in a rich coil on her shoulders, giving an additional touch of tragedy and desperation to the blazing topaz eyes and the white face.

"Now, you must go," she said, in a dry voice, and quietly. "You had better get hold of Fred the instant you reach the office, for Fred knows it all—about our having found each other. I told him for several reasons. I wanted—what am I saying?" she broke off, fretfully. "My head aches so horribly! But I told him, because he was so sure that Mimi would marry you—— He might say something to her, today, that would give her some clue."

"She would tell him of the marriage, first," Stephen said, in a dull, lifeless tone. "I want you to know something about it, Lucretia. Bishop Reynolds is an old, old friend. He married her mother, and mine.

He came down unexpectedly last night, from Boston; he goes back to-day. The opportunity——"

"I see!" she said, briefly and lightly. He realized that she was almost exhausted. "You must go now. I may not see you again, so this is good-bye!"

And quickly, with an air of almost insufferable pain, and blinded dry eyes, she pressed his hand. Something like a ghastly smile flickered on her face for a moment, she inclined her head, he heard her murmur that he could let himself out. A second later he heard her address Hannah in the kitchen.

For a minute or two he stood still, in this room of memories, feeling the bitter waters of his own evoking rise cold and bleak about him. No more Lucretia. No more tea beside the fire, with the exquisite voice and the flashing eyes giving themselves all to him. No more notes—meetings—no more hope and joy. She was gone.

After awhile—he did not know how long—he went downstairs.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The hot dirty street, with chaff and papers eddying on the sidewalk in the warm, erratic wind, was a blank to Stephen Winship as he walked irresolutely to the corner, remembered that his own car was waiting, and went back for it.

"Well, *that's* over!" he said, breathlessly. But the pain at his heart persisted, the frightful sense of something vital and beautiful killed.

"You must go now," Lucretia had said. "I may not see you again, so this is good-bye!" The word came back to him, the accents of her marvellously moderated voice stabbing him with the finality of their tone. She had left him then, and somehow, blindly, he had found the street.

"Anyway," said Stephen, after sitting motionless for an indefinite time at the wheel, "anyway, there was nothing else to do."

He drove away, although it was almost a physical impossibility to look his last at St. Thomas', and his head ached stupidly in the mere effort to recall the events of the last forty-eight hours, and the motives that prompted them.

An hour or two ago they had all been in his uncle's room—Mimi in the blue silk dress—Aunt Bessy sniffing, and glancing about in the heat to be sure the windows were open, just as the Bishop's finished voice began with "We are gathered together. . . ."

"'Now you must go,' she said in a dry voice. 'You had better get hold of Fred the instant you reach the office. Fred knows all about our having found each other'"

Mimi had taken off her hat before this, and smoothed the dark hair that had been roughened by the quick trip with Stephen to the City Hall and to the jeweller's shop. Her first act as a married woman had been to lay her face against the Judge's emaciated old hand, and cry a little through her brave smile. Then she had kissed him, and received a gallant salute from the old Bishop upon her flushed cheek, and then had followed kisses for Aunt Bessy and Mrs. Porter, the only other witnesses to the ceremony, since Fred was so mysteriously absent.

Everyone had cried, there had been low laughter, too, and murmuring. They had all gone out into the wide, airy hall, where Stephen caught his wife, and twisted her about for his first kiss.

"Look here, don't I get anything?"

"Oh, you——! But you know what I think of *you!*"

But Mimi had kissed him frankly, childishly, none the less, before going into tremendously important questions regarding clothes, and Marjorie, and notes to friends, and a thousand other details deliciously exhilarating and exciting.

"I ought to go up to Red Pine, if we're really going to New York," she had said, "my fitted case is there, and my lovely umbrella, and my best hat! But never mind——"

"We can get another hat!" Stephen had assured her. And then, when they were all downstairs, and the possibility of their voices reaching the sick-room was removed, all their gaiety had dropped, and their tones had become sober and fearful. "Do you think we'd better go?" Stephen had asked his aunt, tenderly. And with brimming eyes, Mrs. Curran had answered:

"Oh, Steve, I don't know as you had better! He's —he's getting so weak!"

"You have the consolation, Mary, of having made him very happy," the Bishop had reminded Mimi, who put a protecting arm about her aunt's shoulders, and looked at the others almost defiantly.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, dear," Stephen had decided. "I'll run down to the office now, and attend to one or two matters, and see if there is any word from Fred——"

"I don't *understand* Fred——!" Mrs. Curran had moaned, faintly.

"Meanwhile, you pack what you need," Stephen had continued, "and I'll get tickets, and wire the hotel. Then, if there is no real reason to be alarmed, at half-past nine to-night you and I will go off on our tour—in any case, we'll be back to-morrow afternoon, Aunt Bessy. But if he is worse this afternoon, then without letting him know that we haven't gone, we can just quietly be on hand in case—well, in case——"

"Oo—oo—Sam!" whispered the wife of forty years, pressing her handkerchief to a soft old face almost frightened with grief. The wife of an hour held her tighter.

"Aunt Bessy darling!" Mimi had pleaded. "He'll notice—you mustn't, dear, *please!*"

And Stephen had kissed them both again, solemnly, before going out to his car. It was on the doorstep that Lucretia's messenger, a son of old Lejeal of the book-shop, had met him. The note was for him, and there was no answer.

So, she admitted that she knew something of Fred! Stephen had reflected grimly, reading it. And he

wondered if there was any possibility of their having been married yesterday in New York. He went to Kingsgreen Square at once.

And now, dazed and disturbed beyond anything he could ever remember in his life, he was driving away from her, from that shaded room with the gently ballooning window blinds, and the sharp sweetness of roses, and the echoes of that amazing and heart-rending voice.

He knew what he must do, but he was far from sure that he could do it. Mimi must come first, of course, even though Lucretia—yes, and himself, paid bitterly for every moment of that loyal protection. Mimi had always been protected; the time for him to end that big-brotherly care had passed now. It had all fallen out like the movement of a play, the futile, half-hearted effort he had made to undeceive her, his own wretched doubt and wavering trust in Lucretia, his uncle's illness, his affectionate, almost apologetic, overtures toward Mimi that the girl had accepted so happily and so fully, the invalid's plea for a marriage—a plea that could not be denied, and finally, just when his heart was sorest toward Lucretia, and just when the mysterious and baffling interloper had quite openly deceived him and evaded him, the Bishop's timely appearance, and the last necessary urge provided by this sudden, unmistakable approach of death.

Until this time yesterday, Stephen told himself, he had been free. He had felt that any little turn of the wheel might straighten out the whole tangle.

Well, the wheel had turned, and there was no tangle now. His path lay straight ahead. He was not to be saved by his uncle's death, by a sudden intuition on Mimi's part, and a sudden softening in Lucretia.

"I must be weak," Stephen told himself, as in the burning heat of the midday he mounted the odorous, wide, iron-and-cement halls to his office. "Or perhaps it is that I have never had much to do with women. I don't understand them!"

And he looked ahead to travel, to the establishment of a home, to taking his place in the community, with Mimi beside him. Christmas—summer on the mountain, dinner-parties, the club. The whole dream fell lifeless; he could not animate it; he could not make it seem real. He could do it, of course, and he *would* do it. He would admire the new hat, and admire the vivacious young face under it; he would always consider her, guard her, spoil her.

But there was none of the glamour here of the dream he had had one day of Lucretia: Lucretia beside him at a steamer rail, a tropical breeze blowing a white veil from her white hat, and curling the tawny tendrils of her hair. The shining topaz eyes, the rich voice, the clean-cut line of the beautiful lips—these would be far away, out of his life, never to be his again. A little trick she had of pressing those beautiful lips together, and of drawing the fine brush of her delicate brown eyebrows together, when she was thoughtful, rose up in his memory, and a salt tension in his throat gave him a moment of acutest pain.

He opened the office door; Fred, with a face of misery, pleasure, and entreaty, turned about in a swivel chair, got quickly to his feet, and came instantly toward him.

"Steve—old boy! You've seen Lucretia? You're not angry at me? Say that you know I know what a skunk I've been, and that you aren't angry?" Fred said, eagerly. "Steve, say anything you want to, but

just let me tell you—just let me tell you what a hell I've been in! For three years—more than three years, I've had this accursed thing on my mind every minute, day and night! It was Unger that got me into it, said that he could turn four thousand into forty—it seemed as safe as a church—I wanted you to see what I could do! And then when it was gone, I kept hoping that somehow I'd make a deal somewhere, and that my slice would be four or five thousand. And then I took more, just after old Rutger made that six-to-one haul—it seemed to me that I had to take the chance. You don't know what I went through—honest, Steve——"

Stephen had remained standing, looking at his brother with the kind, keen, sorrowful look that would be his harshest for Fred, come what might.

"I wish you had come to me, Fred," he said, slowly, in the first pause.

"Steve, how could I? I knew that you hadn't any such surplus!"

"I could have gotten it!"

"Yes, but you had all the rest of the whole crowd on your hands! I—Steve, I couldn't tell you. And whenever we got a case, I'd plan to put something toward the thing—I did put more than four thousand back, for I'd gotten it down to less than eleven! And if Uncle Sam hadn't been taken ill, I would have cleared it all up long before Mimi ever asked for her securities! Steve, I know how rotten it was——"

His voice hung upon an anxious question, he smiled at his brother with something of the penitent timidity that had made him so lovable a child a few years ago.

"We shall have to arrange to pay her back immedi-

ately. I can't allow her to loan us money. I want you to give that your first attention while I'm away. If you'll see the Trust Company, I'm sure they'll accept our note. I'll manage to take it up as soon as I get back. . . . You certainly have complicated things, old boy," Stephen finished, mildly, with a long sigh.

"If I've really gotten you in wrong——!" Fred began, anxiously. But immediately he was confident again. "Lucretia Lombard is one woman in a million, Steve," he said. "I suppose she told you how she pulled me out? No hesitation about it, no questions; it was just a matter of arranging how fast we could get her pearls out of storage, and get some money on them! Going down in the train I said, 'I don't know why you're so decent about this, Lucretia!' And then she told me, Steve, how much you had come to mean to her, and that you two would some day be married. She was helping me out to save you from worry. She told me all about Mimi.

"By George," said Fred, simply, "you could have knocked me down! Steve, I never got onto it at all. Of course she told me that her being a widow so recently, and everything being upset at the house would keep this all quiet for awhile, but I feel awfully happy about it, Steve—she's *the* woman in the world for you! I wish you could have seen people stare at her when we walked down Fifth Avenue—and let me tell you, it doesn't faze her! She's used to it, she makes 'em all stand 'round!"

"I'm very sorry that you should have learned of my feeling for Lucretia, Fred," Stephen said, steadily and simply, with a grave face. "You—you mustn't men-

tion this again, of course. But in every way my loyalty is due to Mimi—she and I were married this morning, at ten o'clock, and we are going to New York to-night."

But even as he said the words, they did not seem true.

Fred stood staring at him blankly for a full minute. "What's that? . . . You and Mimi?" he said, stupidly, at last.

"I mean it," Stephen answered, seriously. And he turned to hang his straw hat upon its peg, with what he tried to make a natural and quiet manner.

"I don't believe it!" Fred said, flatly, in a toneless voice.

"It is true, nevertheless." Stephen drew a pile of mail toward him, and glanced at the topmost letters wearily and indifferently. "We tried to get you—you were out of town," he continued, lifelessly. "You can do me a favor, Fred, by just dropping the whole matter, and standing by Aunt Bessy while Mimi and I are in New York. Mimi is a splendid woman," he added, passing his hand over his forehead, as if to brush some troublesome mist away, "too good for me, or for any man! I propose to take care of her, and of Aunt Bessy, and go straight ahead with Uncle Sam's affairs and with Mimi's. Mrs. Lombard is, I believe, to sail for England very soon. Did you answer this option from Cheseborough, Fred? I see the Civic Centre estimates are in——"

Fred, whose handsome face was a little pale, and wore a look of compunction and concern extremely unusual, came to sit opposite his brother at the flat-top desk, and stretched out his hand.

"Stevie, I know just what you're doing," he said, a little huskily, "I haven't meant much to you, Steve. But it'll be different from now on; I'll stand with you through it all. She *is* a fine woman, Steve—Mimi, I mean, and I think you've done right, and I know it'll all turn out right. I'll go out and see Lucretia, too, and talk to her to-night!"

"She's gone up to Gunther's this afternoon. But thank you, Fred!" was all Stephen said. But the two brothers had never been so close together in all their lives.

"We'll—we'll pull out of this all right!" Fred said, somewhat uncertainly, watching the orderly swift manipulation of the mail.

"Of course we will!" Stephen laid another letter in the wire basket, rang for his stenographer, dictated several letters in his usual manner. "I have one forty-seven," he said presently to Fred, who was efficiently busying himself with various matters, in that flood of peace and gratitude known only when a long strain is raised. "I told Aunt Bessy I'd be home for a late lunch at two—will you come along?"

"Say, wasn't it funny that Mimi didn't say anything about your being married to her when I telephoned?" Fred said, suddenly struck.

"I didn't know you did telephone her?"

"Sure I did. Just before you came in, about quarter past twelve. I was afraid Uncle Sam was worse, or something—we only talked for a minute. Say——"

Fred's tone sank, his eyes grew troubled, and he scowled at some unwelcome thought.

"Say, I may have said something about Lucretia!" he said, horrified.

"What could you have said about Lucretia?" Stephen asked, sharply.

"Well, I don't know—I'm trying to think. Lucretia told me that you had told Mimi, you know. By George, I wish I could remember what I said! I thought from what Lucretia said that the engagement was all off—that Mimi understood. I think I said 'Say, what do you think of Steve and Lucretia?'"

"I sincerely hope you didn't!" Stephen said, profoundly concerned.

"I don't think she heard me!" Fred assured him, hastily and uneasily.

"What did she say?"

"Well—I can't remember exactly! She said Aunt Bessy was calling her, and that she had to run—and to come home to lunch——"

"I hope she didn't—however, it's not serious," Stephen said. "I did end our engagement, and I did explain why. But I didn't mention Lucretia's name! However——! Suppose we go right along home now, and see them. You can help me a lot, Fred, by just taking everything for granted, and seeing us all through this mix-up."

"I—Steve, I'm sorry! I will!" Fred said, following him down to the car.

"Mimi is a sensible girl, and she'll not make any fuss just now, whatever she heard," Stephen said, reassured himself, as he took the wheel. He was tired, he seemed to hear Lucretia's voice the moment there was silence.

"You *dared*—loving *me!*"

The baking, breathless day was full of echoes and voices; far up to the north the forest fires still filled

the air with a dreamy blue haze; it was hard to see where the summer azure of the sky ended and where the unnatural blue of far pine forests began.

"It seems to me that the forest fires are worse this year, Steve!"

"It's just the clearness of the day, I imagine. Although I saw something in the paper this morning about a call for volunteers—Chief Terry offering them ten dollars a day, I believe. Usually the local departments can manage them!"

"Lucretia said that last year there were actual wood cinders on Gunther's porch!"

"Yes, I remember last year was bad. It's a bad business—one of our national wastes!"

They were at the Curran house, and went in together.

Mrs. Curran met them; everything was just as usual in the sick-room, Mimi was lying down, tired out, and no wonder. She had been awake, and in and out of her uncle's room all through the long hot night; she wanted sleep.

"And considering the trip to-night," the old lady said, with the nearest approach to happiness that she had shown for several weeks, "I think it's the wisest thing she could do! My boy married to dear little Mimi," she added, her soft, fat, wrinkled cheek against Stephen's coat sleeve. "It just seems too sweet to be true! Dear girl—you couldn't have a lovelier wife, Steve, and when I think of the way you two have loved each other—been just like brother and sister all your lives! Mimi—— Bring in the lunch all at once, Emma," Mrs. Curran interrupted herself, for they were at the table now. The pudgy little hands manipulated forks and glasses in fussy solicitude. "Mimi—— And a napkin

for Mr. Fred, Emma. Mimi," said her Aunt Bessy, with a sort of fond maternal cluck, "wanted to run up to Red Pine, actually, for her suit-case and her best hat, and I don't know what all! But I told her her husband would see she got everything she wanted in New York! Dear me, I remember Mimi's mother——"

The old voice ran on happily, it was all the more tremulously glad because it had been so lately tuned by grief. And Sam, the fond, blind old wife had persuaded herself, was really better; there was a peaceful look in his face, she said, and even the nurse was astonished at the brightness with which he smiled.

Stephen listened, looked up with a grave, abstracted frown, made himself smile sympathetically. The cold chicken, the tomato jelly, were so much sawdust to his taste; after a few moments he did not try to choke them down. He had an important meeting at five o'clock, but Aunt Bessy must interrupt it if "there was any change." And he was glad Mimi was getting some rest.

CHAPTER XXIX

Lucretia, meanwhile, had gone into her bedroom and shut the door. And for almost an hour she sat motionless, staring straight ahead of her into space, until the early afternoon sun crept round to the brick wall of St. Thomas', and the glare hurt her dry, aching eyes.

"So," she said, softly and audibly then, "that's the way it's going to be?"

And she got lamely and slowly to her feet, brushed the gold mist of hair from her eyes, looked irresolutely at the suit-case that was opened upon the bare mattress of the bed, and somewhat dazedly began to add certain small articles from the dressing-table to its contents.

"I will not die, and I will not kill myself," she said out loud, after awhile, "and I'm twenty-nine. Thirty-nine, forty-nine, fifty-nine——! At fifty-nine perhaps I shall not care. We might have had grandchildren then, Steve, a big country house with porches and trees, and our children's children coming to us for the holidays!

"But that," she added, in a quiet, unemotional voice, "that was not to be. No. He and Mimi are married——"

She finished her packing, brushed up her bright hair, pressed the white hat down over it, and slipped into her loose white coat.

"I must get away! But where can I go? I can't stay here—I can't stay in this room! But if I should go somewhere and be ill, if I should be ill—and I might!—

Mrs. Gunther would take care of me," she murmured, feverishly. "She expects me back to-day, anyway. I'll go back. I can plan, there. And if I should be ill—raving—she would protect me——

"But I must get there before I begin to cry. I can go on the four o'clock train. If I cry there—nobody need see it. I can stay in bed. But I can't stay here, not where Stephen has been so many times. That chair—that's where he used to sit, with that stern sort of smiling look of his. Oh, my God—not to have Stephen in my life any more!——But I mustn't cry.

"I feel as if I had been struck by a bullet, in the heart," she said, when she was seated in the train, after an hour or two that seemed to have left no record in her memory. "But fortunately—fortunately—I don't seem to have any desire to cry. If I can weather this for a few weeks—pack things up, and get away!"

She opened her magazine, and studied a full-page photograph of a sixteen-year-old theatrical star.

"It astonishes me," she told herself, almost aloud, "for I cried so frightfully when I was first married. I remember when we were at Mentone, every time I met any one in the hotel I wanted to cry. And heavens! how I cried when Mama died——"

She drummed lightly with her fingers upon the brown linen cover of her chair, arching her throat suddenly, and shutting her eyes.

"But I mustn't think of that—I mustn't think of things like that!" she warned herself quickly, reopening the magazine. "Sixteen years old, and a salary bigger than the President's! She's pretty—I wonder what life will mean to her at twenty-nine! It won't be roses, roses all the way, I suppose! Twenty-nine. I thought I was

going to be so happy! I thought no matter what came to us, it would be so wonderful. A little table, and a green lamp—— And in summer we would put a suit-case in the car, and go off into the mountains for week-ends! But I must not think about it——"

The train hammered on, in dust and heat. A yellow glare seemed to envelop the rocking car. Villages swam by, shabby in midsummer heat. Toward the north, the blue haze of the distant fires added one more note of heat and dazzle to the whole.

Lucretia pinned her veil, to descend at Farley's, eager for a breath of mountain air. It was while she was standing in the car, watching the bags that were being hastily assembled by the porter, that glancing casually down the littered aisle, she first saw Mimi.

Mimi's chair was only some ten feet away; she was lying back in it, bare-headed, and with closed eyes. Her dark hair was in some disorder, and her face white, and stained quite unmistakably with tears.

Lucretia did not know why, but she did not want Mimi to see her! If Mimi was wounded, she was wounded, too; this was no time for them to meet.

"She feels terribly!" Lucretia thought, getting into the Gunther surrey with only an absent greeting for the expectant old driver. "Poor child, she feels *terribly*. She has found out in some way! She is running away from him! It can be nothing else."

And looking at the rising walls of the forest, streaming now with the pennants of the hot afternoon sun, she felt her heart ache for the young wife, weeping—running away—on the very day of days, in the crowning hour of her life!

The thought was followed by another. Who would

be at the cabin when Mimi got there? Not Stephen, not Fred, not the Rutgers. She would be all alone, with the old Italian woman. Lucretia felt a pang of terror. She was not going to kill herself?

"Surely not, sane little Mimi." But there had been a look of desperate anguish upon the white face. Lucretia felt the first twist of uneasiness grip her.

She wanted no supper; she stood in the dining-room door only for a moment, shaking her head, with a great wave of distaste, at the mere thought of the wilted salad and the boiled rice. Food would choke her.

Life was all a pain and a bewilderment. Stephen—Mimi—herself; the triangle melted and formed, melted and formed again endlessly, in her mind. It was sunset when a sudden impulse seized her, and she told Mrs. Gunther that she was going to walk over the hill to Red Pine.

"You ain't going to walk over that mountain to-night!" the old lady said, incredulously.

"I think I will. There's an hour of daylight left. Anyway, the fires are almost close enough to give their own light to-night! And there will be a moon."

"They've got that fire under control," a man said.

"So I understand. We saw some fighters coming back when we drove up to-night." Lucretia pinned her broad-brimmed hat. To see Mimi, to talk to her, whether she knew anything or not, was something definite to do! And action was welcome, any action that held off the dreadful moment when everything that concerned Stephen must drop further and further into the past.

Mimi did understand, of course. Was there any other conceivable construction to place upon her ashen,

tear-stained face, upon her running away from her uncle, her aunt, and the man to whom she had been married a few hours ago?

Up the mountain road, in the warm light, went Lucretia, taking the six miles steadily, almost without thought of any effort. The road grew brighter at the top of the hill, and she could see the twilight beginning to blend with the dull pink glow of fire far away. But on the other side of the summit it was almost dark in the warm odorous woods, and Lucretia began to think that her sudden appearance far up in this lonely place, might give Mimi and the old Italian woman a moment of unpleasant shock.

However, the cabins stood in a clearing, and there was still clear and shadowless twilight about them, mingling mystically with the first timid light of a great moon that was rising slowly over the orchard. Not a breath of air stirred, and about the place, as Lucretia came down the woodland road toward it, lingered a most unnatural silence.

She called, standing still in the garden:

"Mimi! Matea!"

There was absolute silence. Then a bat looped the dusk, and some sleepy bird broke the stillness with a muffled drowsy chuckle, under leaves.

Lucretia felt frightened. She went up the steps, pushed open a screen door, stepped into the warm, dark interior. Her heart stopped beating, plunged, and began to race again. She had caught the unmistakable sound of muffled sobbing.

She went swiftly toward a bedroom door, and saw a girl's figure outlined against the dim square of pale gray that was the bedspread.

Timidly Lucretia went to stand beside her, touched her shoulder.

"Mimi—it's Lucretia."

Mimi turned over, sat up, sniffing. Her breast was still heaving, her voice thick with tears, and Lucretia sensed rather than saw that her hair and gown were dishevelled.

"Mimi, I was worried about you!" Lucretia said, all her heart going out in pity and affection.

"Oh, you?" Mimi said, dazedly, without surprise. "Who—I've been lying down!—who is with you?"

"I'm alone. I walked over the mountain."

"Oh, I see!" Mimi's voice was thick and rough with tears. Obviously she did not see. "I'll—I'll light the light!"

"Let me!" Lucretia fumbled eagerly at the little bedside table, scraped a match; the plain little country bedroom, in its chintzes and white wood furniture, wavered uncertainly into view. Shadows grouped and dissolved, as a hot wandering breath of wind came in at the opened windows.

Mimi's face, under its blotches, was pale, pathetic, and very young. Her surprised and questioning eyes gleamed between tear-sopped lashes. She looked like a child, and when she spoke her voice had the resentful accents of a crying child.

"I suppose you know what I'm *crying* about!" she said, beginning to cry again.

Lucretia's tone was exquisitely finished and deep, as she answered, quietly:

"I suppose I do."

"I have—I have loved Stephen Winship all my life!" said Mimi, her breast rising.

Lucretia laid her fingers over the hand nearest her. "I know you have."

"Perhaps," said Mimi, defiantly, putting her feet toward the floor, and giving her eyes and nose a firm pressure with her damp handkerchief before she rolled it into a sodden ball, "perhaps you—you like Stephen, too! I suppose you may feel——"

She stopped, again like a child; this one frightened at its own daring. There was a silence in the warm, candle-lighted room, and then Lucretia said, mildly:

"What I feel, Mimi, is of no consequence whatever!"

"Excuse me, but I think it is!" Mimi said, trembling. "If Stephen Winship loves you—then I think it *is* of consequence! I think it is of *supreme* consequence! You can't put me off by saying that it doesn't matter, and you can't make me feel that it's right. I was engaged to him——" Mimi was crying bitterly now, "and you *know* it!"

Silence. Lucretia's beautiful face was grave with pain. After awhile she said:

"Mimi, did you have any supper?"

Mimi had buried her face in her hands. She raised her head.

"Did I what? No, I didn't want any supper!"

"Where is Matea?"

"I don't know. She left a note, but I can't read it; it's in Italian. I don't know where she's gone to," said Mimi, fretfully. "She never goes off this way!"

"She's gone? You would have been alone here!"

Evidently the concern in the lovely voice reached Mimi, for there was the first hint of a softening in her tone as she answered:

"Yes, she's not here. I'm all alone!"

"And you have had no supper?"

"Oh," said Mimi, desperately, "I don't *want* any supper!"

Lucretia moved to the bureau, where the dim mirror was full of dark reflections. She laid aside her hat.

"I want to talk to you," she said, almost absently. Mimi sat on the side of the bed, tousled and resentfully watchful, her tears slowly drying. Lucretia went out of the room, and into the kitchen.

After a few minutes Mimi slowly and unwillingly followed her. Lucretia had put bread and fruit on the table, and a china pitcher of milk.

"We shall do very well," said the older woman, mildly. "Matea cannot intend to be long away, for everything is here. There is cold meat and a fruit pie of some sort, and all this cake!"

"I don't know why you should wait upon me!" Mimi said, sulkily, from the doorway.

For answer Lucretia gave her a grave, measuring look, as she moved a chair to the table.

Mimi came toward her with a rush.

"There—that's what Matea left, if you can make anything of that!" she said, tumbling a small piece of white paper on the table. Lucretia spread it open, and the girl was impressed in spite of herself by the casual manner in which she read it and said:

"Matea was afraid of the fire; she has gone to stay with her son."

"Afraid of these forest fires!" Mimi said, scornfully. "She had no business to go! We have forest fires nearly every year. I don't know why I'm talking like this!" she broke off, faltering, and dropping into a chair she buried her head in her arms upon the table.

"I'm not usually so cross!" sobbed Mimi. "But I had a bad night, and this morning the Bishop—and I wanted to say then——" she went on, incoherently, "I wanted to say *then* to Steve that perhaps he wasn't sure—because of what he had said that Sunday, up here——"

"It is exactly about all that that I have come to see you!" Lucretia answered, when the young voice suddenly stopped.

There was a silence, in which Mimi dried her eyes, and looked up, but without meeting Lucretia's glance, and somewhat composed herself, although still with the same hurt and stubborn face. She put out a hand, and straightened the candle-wick, breathing hard all the time, and occasionally touching her eyes with a fresh handkerchief.

"Will you have some supper?" Lucretia asked, watching her.

"I'm—truly I'm not hungry!"

"Nor am I. But it will only exhaust you and perhaps give you a headache to fast," Lucretia said, patiently.

"I don't get headaches!" Mimi answered, in a low, quick voice.

"I hoped you would talk to me about this, Mimi," Lucretia said, with some dignity. "I came here from Gunther's to-night in the hope that we might understand each other. You make me feel that it was a mistake. I cannot very well leave you alone to-night, but to-morrow we can go in to Warren's Mills together. Or, if Matea comes back, I will go back to Gunther's alone!"

There was a certain finality in the tone that was

disquieting to Mimi. She was naturally anxious, above all things, to think and talk of her own most dreadful affair, and the thought that Lucretia, who was unexpectedly reserved at times, might give her no other opportunity, filled her with disappointment. The fact of Lucretia's coming to her was at least reassuring, and the other woman's quiet acceptance of her duty in remaining, whatever the circumstances, while Mimi needed her, appealed to the girl even through her fatigue, despair, and fear.

She did not answer Lucretia in words, but she poured herself a glass of milk, and raising it to her lips, looked seriously at Lucretia over the top of her glass. And when Lucretia smiled encouragingly and affectionately at her, Mimi's lip trembled, and she put down the glass, and fumbled for her handkerchief again.

But this time her tears were softening and healing and before they were dried she laid her hand over Lucretia's hand, and managed a watery smile in return.

"Don't, Mimi," said Lucretia, blinking, "or you will make me cry, too, and then we shall never get anywhere!"

And for a few moments they devoted themselves to the meal, to which Mimi, reviving visibly, brought a young and healthy appetite.

"I hope," said Lucretia then, "that you will go back to town to-morrow a very happy and confident—bride, and that you will never have any cause to doubt Stephen again, in all your life!"

"No," said Mimi, steadily and sadly, "I am going to give him up! I have been thinking of it all day—coming up in the train I thought I was going to *die!* And I have made up my mind, I am going to give him up."

"I hope you will change your mind, then," Lucretia said, a little pale.

"Let's—it's so hot in here, let's go out on the porch!" Mimi said, restlessly. They darkened the kitchen, and stepped out to the east porch, below which lay a wooded valley flooded with moonshine. "It is the forest fires that are making the air so awful tonight," Mimi said. "But we are going to have a storm, the air is heavy with it! Sit down——"

She sat down herself, on the top step, Lucretia taking a wicker rocker a few feet away.

"I certainly could not be any man's wife, knowing that he did not love me!" said Mimi, without preamble, after a silence.

"I hope you love him enough to do the only thing that is right, Mimi," answered Lucretia.

"Give him up?" the girl said, proudly.

"No—harder than that!" the thoughtful voice from the shadows answered again.

Mimi locked her slim arms about her knees, staring down at the pinnacled descending tops of the trees bathed in gray moonlight.

"I can't!" she said.

"Mimi, you are married to him now," Lucretia reminded her.

Mimi turned about on the step, leaning her arms across Lucretia's knees, her eyes shining in the darkness.

"Can you say *truthfully*—can you say *truthfully*—that you would talk this way, if Steve and I hadn't gone through that—that ridiculous ceremony this morning?"

"But why do you call it ridiculous, Mimi?" Lucretia asked, digressing in surprise.

"Because it *was!* Because I never should have allowed it."

"It is a curious thing, that ceremony," Lucretia said, musingly. "It seems to be so trifling. But it is an important thing, Mimi, as you will see if you think for a minute!"

"A marriage like that can be annulled!" said Mimi, in whose mind the word had been running all day.

"It might be, although I don't know exactly for what cause. You might find that Bishop Reynolds had something to say about that—I understand that he is extremely inflexible about such matters. What cause would you give for annulling, Mimi? Usually it follows an elopement, or a bigamy——"

"Ugh!" Mimi interrupted, shuddering, and was silent. "Isn't it enough that people don't—don't love each other?" she asked, after awhile.

"But you and Steve *do* love each other!"

"Only that he loves somebody else more," stammered Mimi, thickly, looking away.

"But let us speak of your annulled marriage first," Lucretia said. "Have you any idea what that would mean to him, just now? You went with him to the license bureau this morning—those records are public, you know, the morning papers will certainly mention it conspicuously. Your aunt and Mrs. Porter know of the marriage, I suppose?"

"And Marjorie and Ted—and the maids, and Grace, and the doctor," Mimi contributed. "We didn't try to keep it a secret! Why should we? But——"

"Now, for no apparent reason, this marriage is annulled," Lucretia pursued. "Can you imagine what that would mean to Stephen's political opponents?

It would ruin him. He would be marked for the rest of his life!

"Mimi," she went on, as Mimi was silent, "there was an old officer in England, we knew him well, a few years ago. When he was a lieutenant, coming back from Sedan, a certain group of six or seven impulsive English girls, meeting the soldiers in London, threw their arms about him, and kissed him in the street. Nearly fifty years later, when I first met him, he was a General—but he was still known as 'Kissing Tommy'! Those girls and their foolishness had marked him for life!"

"But this is different!" said Mimi, with just a hint of something eager, something yielding, in her voice.

"Different because it is infinitely more serious!" Lucretia answered.

The girl sat still, her fingers knotted, her face, with its faint frown, turned toward the moon that was sailing through an obscured sky.

"Lucretia—don't you love him?" she asked, presently. "Can you honestly tell me that you don't?"

Again there was silence, and then Lucretia said steadily:

"No, I cannot tell you that."

"Then why are you talking to me this way?"Mimi said, childishly.

"Perhaps," the other woman's voice said, slowly, "because I do!"

Mimi was impressed, and everything that was generous and fine in her rose to meet the situation. She put her hand up to take Lucretia's.

"The past is the past, Mimi, we cannot undo it," Lucretia said. "But you are a woman now, and you

"'He could despise me, and I would win him! He could be tied a thousand times, and I would go to him . . .'"

must face the future with courage—like all the rest of us! You have never had sorrow, but you will have your own and your aunt's to bear. And you have never had discipline, but the next year will be hard for you, my dear!"

The words were infinitely bracing to Mimi, who felt herself admitted by them to that world of helping and serving, and bearing and enduring and renouncing, to which she had always been an outsider. That was Steve's world—Lucretia's world—a world of dignity, of poise, of self-denial and self-development, and Mimi stood, a little awed, at its gates, and felt her young spirit dedicate itself to a new life, a heroic and splendid life in which she would do what was fine and right.

"I want to do what is right, for Steve!" she faltered, with watering eyes.

"And I want to do what is best, for Steve," Lucretia echoed, quietly, but with such sadness in her voice that Mimi felt her first pang of genuine pity.

"Lucretia, but if he loves you?" she said.

"Surely, in a heart as big as his, there is room to love us both!" Lucretia said.

"But—but if he wants to marry you, Lucretia! If it's that sort of love?"

"He loves me," Lucretia assented, gently drumming upon the hand she held with her own smooth hand, and speaking in a voice almost abstracted. "And I am prouder to think that he loves me, than of anything else that has ever come into my life! Other men have loved me, Mimi, and other men will, but it is this quiet, good dear Steve of yours who has changed all my life for me!"

Mimi could not speak, tears rushed to her eyes.

"Steve is not like most men," said Lucretia, musingly, "he is the most unselfish—the only truly unselfish—man, that I have ever known! If it is for your happiness—Fred's—any one's happiness, then he has infinite time and patience to spend! If it is for himself—then he cannot judge. You must always manage him, Mimi, take care of him, and see that life doesn't impose upon him too much. I met him when I was lonely—some day I will tell you, perhaps, of the odd little circumstances that made the beginning of that friendship so wonderful. I knew—almost instantly, that I loved him. Women will always love him!

"And if he had been free," she went on, presently, as Mimi did not speak, "I think we might—but he is not free. He has loved you ever since you were a little girl, and now you are his wife! And it is for you to decide whether you will wreck his life, ruin his political career, or whether you will be a little patient, whether for all their sakes you will not have the courage to wait. Why, Mimi, in a year or two you may be going to Washington, the wife of Senator Winship—perhaps with your beautiful baby in a nurse's arms, Stephen with you——"

Mimi put her face down against the smooth hand, and kissed it, and kept her cheek there for a few moments of silence.

"Do you think a memory of me will trouble him then?" Lucretia asked. "I will be far away—I am going away now, I will not see him again! And they all need you—everyone of them, and they will need you during all these days of strain and change——"

"Lucretia," said Mimi, looking up with wet cheeks, "why are you so good to me?"

Lucretia did not answer for awhile, her free hand moved gently on Mimi's head.

"Good!" she said at last, with a hint of bitterness in her voice. "I am not good! I knew—when he came to tea with me, when my whole life was just for those half-hours—and to watch his mouth, when he smiled, and to hear his voice—I knew that I had no right, starved that I was, even to that! But, Mimi, Mimi—you must forgive me, for I love him so! He could despise me, and I would win him! He could be tied a thousand times, and I would go to him, in the face of the world—as his wife—his mistress—anything he asked of me, so that I might live! So that we might have one year—one little year—of joy!"

Mimi was frightened, for Lucretia had risen suddenly, and had walked to one of the rough pillars of the porch. She encircled it with one arm, looking off into the moonlight, tone and manner full of a tragedy and passion utterly unlike her usual self-control.

"Do you think that his Senatorship, that money or position or success would make any difference to *me?*" she asked, almost fiercely, turning to glance over her shoulder at her companion. Her beauty, as she stood there, with her superb figure outlined against the starry bright sky of clear blue, eyes and hair alike radiating their strange golden glints and sparkles, was so extreme as almost to startle the watching girl. "Those things—to *me?*" Lucretia went on, quickly and angrily. "I have had them, and been wretched! I have been without them, and been happy! I would have asked him to go with me to Italy, to some little blue house up in the grape country, I would have asked him to go with me to Barbadoes, where the warm rains

come three times a day, between floods of sunshine; we would have wandered through India and China and in and out of Paris streets! Whatever we had, it would have been enough, and more than enough, for me!"

The splendour of the vision shamed Mimi. And she had been teasing him about a house in Keystone Road, she thought, with burning cheeks. She had fretted over Pembroke and Chippendale!

"But I could have married him," Lucretia went on, still in the same hurried and passionate way, "if your uncle had died—if, as I thought, he had made you understand——"

"He did try!" Mimi interrupted, overwhelmed at her own stupidity. "But—but I *couldn't* understand!"

"I could have married him, and come back to my own little house next to St. Thomas'," Lucretia pursued, as if she had not heard her. "I would have made his friends my friends, I would have helped him in his work. But the one thing I cannot do," she added, her tone suddenly low and grave, as if she spoke half to herself, "is just what you propose. I cannot hurt him! If we were ever married now, we must go away. Away from his brother, his work, from you, who need him. He feels that you are a sacred charge, Mimi, and the time would come—the time would come!—when, wherever we were, whatever we were doing, the past would rise up like a ghost, and he would long for home, for snowy winter afternoons in his office, and summer afternoons at the club, for all the men and women he knows, and for Fred most of all, and for you! And then what could I say? No, no woman in the

world is so young, and so beautiful, and so loved that she dares do that!"

"But, Lucretia—if I went back to him to-morrow—how could I keep all this secret—keep it from him that I know, and that you and I have had this talk?" Mimi said, eager to be told.

Lucretia came back to her chair, and sat down, patting the girl's hand in silence again.

"Why not tell him?" she asked, in a weary voice.

Mimi's heart lifted.

"You think I might?"

"I think you must. And then you will know yourself how to treat him. Be cold to him, if you like," said Lucretia, her whole aspect exhausted and collapsed. "Refuse to forgive him, if you like. Your uncle will not live another forty-eight hours, you will have enough to do! Be patient."

"Lucretia," said Mimi, solemnly, "I will never forget this talk to-night. And I will try!"

Lucretia bent her face over the young, earnest face, and they kissed each other.

"But, Lucretia, suppose—suppose—even after a year or two, he still cares?" Mimi asked, in a sudden panic.

They were standing now, and Lucretia laid her arm lightly about the girl's waist as she answered, confidently:

"He will care only for his wife, then. I know him!"

Mimi had an inner conviction that this was true. He was to have the most devoted, the most capable, the most loyal wife in the world! And, after all, he *did* love her!

"And don't count this—hard as it has been—as all

a sorrow, Mimi," Lucretia said. "You will love him the more for this. You will understand him better! It will make everything plainer to you."

"I know it," Mimi said, soberly. "I feel it!"

She put her arms about the other woman's neck, and looked up at her almost reverently.

"Lucretia, how am I ever going to thank you?"

To this Lucretia could find no answer. She was the taller of the two, and could look down at Mimi's girlish slimness. She made no effort to conceal the sudden brimming of her eyes and the first tremble of her firm lips.

"You must not make me—I shall be lost if I cry!" she said, whimsically and unsteadily. And then, with a second quick kiss, she turned to the house. "Do they know that you are here?" she asked. "Should we telephone your aunt?"

"Marjorie knows, and she was to telephone them at about five that I had come up here, and that I wanted some clothes," Mimi said. "I was afraid that they would stop me! So they know I am here, and of course they suppose Matea is, too. I will telephone in to Warren's Mills, as soon as the telephone girl comes on in the morning—that's about nine, I think—and they will send up a car to take you back to Gunther's, and me to the train!—What was that!"

There was terror in her sudden change of tone; both women drew back with instinctive fear, as some wild woodland creature ran across the garden, and disappeared toward the valley below them.

"A fox!" Lucretia whispered, half-questioning. "I have no idea what it was! A wolf, perhaps?"

"If I had been here alone," shuddered Mimi. "I

hate those things! There are foxes in these woods, they used to come after our chickens, when we had chickens! But wasn't he bold? *Look!* There's another!"

"That's—unmistakably—a bobcat!" breathed Lucretia, holding both Mimi's hands tight, as a second animal fled noiselessly by. "Chasing the fox, perhaps! But how eerie—to see such creatures at night!"

"I have a gun—let's load it!" said Mimi, with a nervous laugh. "I hate them——! Suppose one came and scratched on the window netting—what could we do?"

"I am thinking that I walked through those woods, when it was quite dark, a few hours ago," Lucretia said, her own laugh full of uneasiness. "Suppose one of these gentry—— Let's go in!"

The little diversion was a relief; they could talk naturally, almost gaily together. There were two beds in Mimi's room, and it was arranged that they should sleep there. A few moments later the sudden howl of a wild animal, far up in the woods, brought Mimi from the bathroom, and Lucretia from the bedside, with one bound, to the gun.

"Heavens! I never heard the woods so wild as to-night," Mimi said, a little pale, "and I have been coming here for years!"

"Or is it that we are just a little solitary, and so we notice it?" Lucretia suggested.

"Uncle Sam has a revolver here; shall we load it?" Mimi asked.

"I can fire it," Lucretia said. Both firearms were gravely loaded, and for perhaps an hour the two lay wakeful in their beds, reading and listening. Nothing

more of their own affairs was said; and the evening closed at midnight with a simple good-night.

Lucretia was excited and exhausted; there was exaltation, too, in her mood. But she was too tired to think. Almost as soon as Mimi's even breathing announced that the younger woman's agitations of the long day were ended, Lucretia felt a heavenly drowsiness stealing over her. She turned on her pillow, in the country silence and darkness; there was no pain, no problem, no bitter sacrifice. New York this morning—to-night so strangely, here!

Elevated trains—fields outside the car windows—green sunshine streaming through jalousies—Stephen—Fred—Mimi—merging in a haze. Finally, there was only a hazy Lucretia—half of this world, half of some other just as near and familiar——

She was asleep.

CHAPTER XXX

Her first waking thought was that she was a little girl again, back in the nursery of her aunt's home in Baltimore, with her cousin Harriet's black braid lying across the pillow of the near-by bed. It must be winter, for although even through her closed eyes there was a sense of bright sunshine, Cynthia, the old colored nurse, had lighted a fire. Lucretia could hear its bright loud crackling, and the room was hot——

This was not her room in the rectory—this was not New York——!

She turned over—of course, she was up at Red Pine with Mimi Warren! Memory returned full-fledged; but there was something still unexplained. The heat—and that crackling, purring sound, so infinitely disquieting——?

"Mimi!" But waiting only to see the black head stir, Lucretia ran with the swift feet of terror to the porch. She looked up toward the wooded rise of the mountain she had crossed last night. "Oh, God, it's the fire!" she said.

Straight up beyond the green plumy tops of the trees rose a yellow wall of thick dense smoke, mingling into strange grays and greens as it met the hot, close sky. A horrible muffled purring and bubbling, always with an obligato of brisk crackling and snapping, sounded through the lifeless air. Birds, with dry cawing and crying, were flying over the cabin, and two gray bob-

cats, their green eyes mad with fear, fled by even while Lucretia stood rooted with horror to the cabin porch.

Mimi was beside her; there was no need for words. It was escape now—just life—breath and freedom again!

"The telephone——!" whispered Lucretia.

"They couldn't reach us!"

"Our shoes, dear—we can't get anywhere barefoot!"

They were dressing, both ashen-faced, both breathing like runners.

"Oh, Lucretia—that noise! And it will catch us—it seems to fly! An Italian family, last year—Matea's niece, and her husband, and four dear little children——!"

"Don't think of it!" They were running through the kitchen. "Here," Lucretia said, dashing milk into glasses, "drink this——!"

"Ah, please——! Every second!" Mimi pleaded, even while she gulped obediently. Lucretia caught up a basket, brushing into it cake and bread.

"Water!" she said. "We may find it! We dare not stop!"

They ran through the hot little kitchen, out into a blaze of sunshine hazed with smoke, through which wood cinders were sifting.

"No wind!" Mimi said, her teeth chattering as they ran.

The cabin and its clearing were almost at the top of a great cleft between two mountain ranges. Between it and the road to Gunther's, at the right, was the wall of fire. Down this right-hand flank ran the Warren's Mills Road, too perilously near the flames already, sure—as both women saw with sickened

hearts—to be cut off long before they could cross it. Between the two ridges lay the steep walls of the valley; the fire would swoop there in great sheets of flame.

To plunge into the smothering peril of those woods was unthinkable; they must take the left-hand ridge, come what might. Their only hope, and a terrible hope it seemed, in this hour of agonized fear, was to turn to the unknown and uncharted rise of forest at the left, to scramble through the dense growth somehow, to the summit, to strike some old lumber road, or some mountain clearing, or perhaps, by some miracle, to meet other fleeing refugees, who could help them to safety.

Mimi led the way—there was no waste of words. They skirted the orchard, and the tennis-court, flying over the soft dirt paths just as the frightened animals had been flying all night long. When they reached a little cabin, Matea's cabin, on the left wall of the valley, they stopped for a few seconds of consultation.

"No hope of the Warren's Mills Road, Mimi?"

"No." Mimi looked down the steep cut. "The fire isn't two miles away from it at the Mill!" she said.

Lucretia looked up at the mountain back of them.

"Is there a road through these woods?"

"None. None that we could ever find!"

Panting, they looked at each other. Then Mimi began to tremble.

"Lucretia——?" she whimpered. "Will it—will it——"

"We shall have to do our best!" Lucretia answered. "It's moving southeast, you see—toward Warren's Mills and the railroad. So we don't dare go any direction but this—this must be northwest!"

"But, Lucretia—there's nothing—there's nobody there! Just the lumber woods—for miles and miles!"

"But that's our way!"

Lucretia briskly set off, Mimi following. The air was smoked and parching with heat; they did not talk, the older woman resolutely moving along a dim old trail, Mimi following, with an occasional backward look toward the ominous crackling and purring behind them.

For an hour the sound of the fire and the rustle of dry oak-leaves underfoot were the only interruption of the summer stillness. Then the trail stopped at a weather-beaten lumber cabin, some wood-chopper's casual home, and there must be a moment of consultation again.

"Mimi—we must keep moving up! There is just a chance——!"

"We have no chance!" Mimi said.

"But we must move up! If we get into one of these valleys we are trapped!"

"I know——!" Mimi shuddered.

"Up, then!" Lucretia's face was pale, but there was infinite courage in the spring with which she took a trackless way between the trees. The two had pushed their unbrushed hair under brimmed hats, and these and the hastily assumed garments were snatched and struck by many a random branch or briar as they climbed upward in the burning heat.

Where the pines were large, there were comparatively open spaces, carpeted with dry pine needles, and easy to traverse. But the tangled woods of oaks, and maples, and birches, thick with undergrowth, made heavy walking, and every step, especially in the

merciless morning heat, tugged at breath and strength cruelly.

They reached a summit, the ground miraculously levelled, there was a prospect of descent. But they feared descent.

"Mimi," Lucretia's hot, scratched face peered through the young dogwoods that her bare hands parted, "have you any idea where we are?"

"None. I've lost all sense of direction! But—but we can tell from that!" Mimi avoided the word, but she jerked her head backward toward the pursuing murmur and roar of the flames. "The—the Italian family—but they were much further north than this—were all—found—right on the railway track——!" she said.

"Yes, I know! I remember reading of it!"

"They couldn't escape, even on the level, Lucretia."

"Yes, I know. Are you a little rested? Suppose we strike up through here, staying on this ridge, whatever it is—— If we could come to an opening—and see!"

Mimi's face was scarlet; she looked like a hot child, her dark hair clinging to her wet forehead.

"Lucretia—is it any use?"

"My darling—we cannot lie down here and let it catch us!"

Mimi had been sitting, her back bowed, elbows on knees, and her weary head on her arms.

"We didn't bring a watch!"

"No—but look at the sun. It must be between ten and eleven!"

Mimi looked up through thick netted branches at the hot blue sky that was filmed with yellow smoke.

Without a word they went on, running where they could run for a few feet, stopping sometimes to rest against a low branch, or with a fallen log for a seat, when the pain in Mimi's side choked her, or when indecision as to their way gave them a moment's respite.

"We are on a sort of spur, I think!"

"But suppose it just ends nowhere, Lucretia, as they often do, and we have to go down?"

"Then we must just go down, I suppose!"

"It doesn't sound any nearer—the fire—does it?"

"Not to me!"

On and on and on, in silence. Once Mimi said pitifully:

"Speak to me sometimes!" And Lucretia, with a bright smile on her streaked pale face, answered, in a hoarse whisper:

"We must save every ounce of energy we have!"

But she caught Mimi's hand as she spoke and they stumbled on together.

"Mimi, could you eat?"

"Oh, no, no! My throat is too dry!"

The sun was past the zenith when they came to another deserted cabin, and here Lucretia decreed a real pause. There was a rough table near the door, and when Mimi sank down on the seat beside it, her back against the cabin wall, her head sunk on her arms, she moaned that she could go no further.

"I feel as if my whole body was my heart, Lucretia," she whispered, "just one great throb of heat and tiredness!"

Lucretia was still upon her feet.

"There is water here—listen!" she said, her face lighting strangely under all its grime and weariness.

In the silence both could hear the miraculous drip—drip—drip.

It was a spring, caught by a rusty length of pipe, and falling in an icy trickle into a mossy old half-barrel. Leaves and twigs clotted the dark brown pool; it tasted of them. But the two women did not question it, as they drank deeply, bathed faces and hands, and made their dry meal palatable with its help.

In fifteen minutes, marvellously rested and refreshed, they were on their way again, flying always toward the unknown northwest, with the air growing momentarily less sufferable, and the enemy crouching and creeping, with its sinister laughter, and the licking of lips, behind them.

"This," said Lucretia, a long, long time later, "is no use, I am afraid!"

Their faces were black with heat and looked as if they were bursting with blood. The thin shirtwaists they wore were soaked with perspiration, and the straggling feathers of bright hair that escaped from Lucretia's hat were plastered against her forehead, a forehead scratched by branches, which dust and leaves had streaked and stained with green and brown. Mimi looked ghastly, lines of green-white framed her mouth, and her eyes were blood-shot.

She sank down, when Lucretia spoke, and for a few moments they shared the seat on a fallen oak; the exquisite wood, in all the placid beauty of a summer afternoon, silent and sweet about them, and the fire always chuckling and purring behind. Mimi pressed her hand to her side, Lucretia dropped her head into her hands, panting deeply.

"We must go on, dear!"

"Lucretia!" Mimi's blackened lips moved grotesquely. "I—can't!"

"If we could—*get*—somewhere!"

Mimi's head had fallen back against a tree-trunk, and she closed her fevered eyes. Lucretia walked a few feet in one direction, a few feet in another, peering anxiously through the unchanging vistas of entangled trunks, weaving and interweaving paths that were not paths, rise of oak-carpeted mounds, and crossing and re-crossing of endless little hills and valleys. The blazing August sunshine was battering through the leafy screens everywhere, falling in bright blots and bars wherever her tired eyes turned.

Suddenly an electric thrill went through her. Below her, unmistakable despite the years in which the forest had tried to reclaim it, ran an old lumber road. Littered deep with leaves, disguised by light growths of vines and young shrubs, yet it was there, winding smooth and level under an arch of trees, with here and there a lichened stump to show where trees had been slain to make way for it.

A road! And more than a road, an almost undistinguishable old signboard, where some lost spur had left it once, for the buried cabin of a wood-chopper. Lucretia went close to the weather-blurred board.

A crude arrow pointed to the right: "Sonders, 13 mi." Another crude arrow indicated the opposite direction, "Burchisons."

Mimi, at the hoarse sound Lucretia had made upon this discovery, had dragged herself down to stand beside her. Now she whispered, panting, with her red eyes fixed upon her companion:

"We can't—thirteen miles!"

Swiftly there flashed before Lucretia's eyes scrawled writing on a broad sheet of paper: "Burchisons—— Go by Burchisons."

They were the words planchette had written that night at the Curran house—the night when she and Mimi had met first. Was its message meant for this moment? Was it to be trusted? Was it all-advised? —wise to follow?—a mere coincidence? Had it been only Mimi's subconscious mind writing meaningless words, or did it have some real significance, a message meant to guide her in this supreme hour of their life?

An exalted look of hope came into her eyes, as she took the left-hand turn.

They could run now, and they knew that they had need to run.

It was so hot that the whole world seemed ablaze; cinders stung their faces like bees. After awhile Mimi fell down on her knees, and Lucretia knelt beside her, Mimi moaning that the noise frightened her.

"I think that is thunder, Mimi, I don't think that is the fire!"

But Mimi would not rouse herself, she seemed to be in a feverish sort of stupor. So presently Lucretia went on, half-dragging her; there was no resisting the spur of that hideous noise behind them.

"Nobody could keep this up," Lucretia said, out loud, after what seemed bewildered days of pain and heat and aching weariness. She sank down, Mimi resting against her knees, and moaning now and then.

The fire must be here—that wall of dove-gray between the trees must be smoke. Lucretia looked at it many times before she saw that it might be water, and

not smoke; it might be a little gray lake high up in the mountains.

She waded into it, threw off her clothes, and plunged deep into the blessed coolness and wetness, and after a few minutes forced Mimi to her feet, and with dripping hands and hair drew the girl to the reviving bath.

Sanity returned, they could breathe the furnace air of the late afternoon again. The woods were growing dark, a strange leaden dark, and leaves turned out their furry under-sides, and now and then the great trees rocked violently. The roaring of the fire went on. Red flared in the south.

"We couldn't stay under water, Lucretia, while it went by?" Mimi whispered.

Lucretia shook her head.

"We would have to come up to breathe; the heat would be unendurable. I don't dare," she said, clearing her sore throat to speak.

Mimi shut her eyes, a passive childish look of resignation smoothing all the weariness from her face.

"It must be quick—with this horrible wind!" Lucretia thought, shutting her own eyes. She settled Mimi on the moss, and dragged herself a few hundred feet further along the road. Nothing. Nothing. Lucretia hung her white hat on a conspicuous bramble. They might find them more easily so, when the heat was gone, and the search began. She went back, and sat down, and took Mimi's head into her lap again; once brushing a red cinder from her skirt, once moving her wrist quickly as another stung her.

After awhile she thought it was night, and that Stephen was flashing a blue lantern into her face. Blue lights were everywhere.

Lucretia roused herself to pain and fear. It was not over, blessed death had not taken them yet. Mimi moaned and stirred; they were still in the nightmare of the wood.

It was strange to see her mother there; pretty, impulsive Mama, in the black taffeta gown and the blue hat. But with what wonderful eyes—eyes brimming with love and happiness and understanding, now, as Lucretia had never seen them years ago!

Tears wet her face. She put out her hands.

"Mama! I thought—that day in Rosarios—that you were dead!" she whispered. "I don't know why I'm crying!"

Perhaps it was not tears, it was rain. For it was raining like a cloud-burst all over the old house in Scotland, and battering at the great trees, and making the fire smoke, and Louisa cough. And she was so utterly exhausted that it seemed cruel to let her lie on the rough brick hearth, with hurtful things—the fire-irons perhaps!—pushing into her, and her head such a roar of pain.

Rain—splashing and storming about her, to a great rocking and creaking of timbers. Were they at sea? Why was she out of doors in this uproar?

After that there was an even worse confusion. A cool, wet, lemon-colored light flooded the wood, and Mimi roused, and said with frantic excitement that they must go on. Then it was night—or if that first blackness was night, then this was a second night. Night, and Mimi whimpering in restless sleep, and Lucretia dozing and shivering above her. Once a snarling hairy animal of some sort came close, and puffed a foul, investigating breath in her face.

Dawn. This timid dove and pearl and pink must be God's blessed day returning. An owl swooped with a white breast close to the lake; the morning smote the waters to the color of molten silver. The air was fresh, fragrant, made exquisite with the songs of a million birds.

Mimi would not move, but Lucretia went back to the road again, and to the fork, light-headed, murmuring to herself as she went. Where had the fire gone? She could no longer hear it.

They were on a draggled white horse, the man and the two women, and the little baby. The man, he was a decent sort of man, unmistakably Russian or Polish, would have let her join them. But they could not seem to understand what she said of Mimi, two miles away, and the women cried protestingly, and after awhile their little cortège vanished up the road toward Burchisons—wherever Burchisons was.

Lucretia went back to the lake, and made no further effort to get away. Mimi was suffering from fever and chill, sunburn and exposure; water did not seem the right treatment, but she had nothing else.

The day was long and hot again; mosquitoes buzzed, and stuck to their warm faces. Dragon-flies glittered blue above the lake; Mimi was incessantly dozing, and Lucretia felt heavy and drowsy herself—unable to keep her eyes open.

Then suddenly the honk of a motor-car sounded for the first time in all the ages through the wood. Steps crashed on loose dry branches, and there was shouting.

Lucretia roused, laid Mimi down carefully, got to her feet.

Somebody came springing toward her, men in dusty

coats. Between weakness and joy and a thousand mingled and too-poignant emotions, she stumbled forward, and Stephen's arms were about her, and his face against hers.

"I separated you, Steve—but now I've brought her back to you safely!" she whispered.

Then all sensations, confused and distinct, merged together for awhile into blackness.

A bed—the delicious miracle of sheets and pillows again. Coolness, shadiness, hushed voices and feet. Far outside, birds wheeling in the sunset, and children, and the splash of water. And when she moved, a radiation of anguish through tortured muscles and bones and flesh, all bandaged now in yards of spotless white.

"You ain't going to be allowed to suffer, Mis' Lombard!" This was Ma Gunther, her dark old weather-beaten face placid through tears. "He's got a pill he's going to give ye!"

It was her room—how had she gotten here? The familiar, shabby, beloved country bedroom whose wide-open windows showed the rustling pinnacles of the leafy pear-trees. She closed her eyes again.

But when she opened them she was frowning anxiously, looking beyond Mrs. Gunther, and the uniformed nurse, and a peering, excited woman or two in the doorway.

"You are the heroine of the hour, Mrs. Lombard!" said the nurse, in a pleasant, soothing voice.

"Miss Warren?" Lucretia struggled to find her voice.

"Miss Warren," said the professional, reassuringly, "is coming in to visit you!"

"No—but she really is all right!" Lucretia persisted, incredulously.

"She is, splendidly, just tired, that's all! But if you excite yourself, positively——" the nurse began, warningly.

"I—at the end there, I must have fainted," Lucretia explained, apologetically.

"At the end," said an unexpected voice, "some of the rest of us were there to take up the job!"

"Fred!" Lucretia turned, with a brightening face. He was seated beside her, now she stretched him a hand, even while she closed her eyes wearily again. After awhile she looked up, to meet his watchful gaze. "Is Mimi really all right?" she whispered. "What—what time is it?"

"Seven o'clock. We picked you up about one, brought you in here an hour later. Mimi's awake, and wants to come in, but the doctor says you must have some milk first!"

"Oh, anything——!" She emptied the long glass as obediently as a child, and watched like a happy child the arrangement of a great chair lined with pillows and comforters.

Mimi came in laughing shakily and hoarsely, carried like a baby in Stephen's big arms. When she and Lucretia saw each other both began to cry, and as Mrs. Gunther and the nurse heartily, if smilingly, joined them, and the tears communicated themselves to the women in the halls, it was some moments before the good effects of the little visit could show themselves.

But then Mimi held tight to Stephen's hand, and Fred to Lucretia's, and somehow the terrible story got itself reviewed, to a chorus of thrilled comment.

They had been given up for lost, of course, and the circumstances of Mimi's marriage, followed so swiftly by the old Judge's death——

Yes, Uncle Sam was gone. His loyal little niece buried her head in Stephen's shoulder for a moment when she heard that the losing fight was over.

Uncle Sam was gone; Aunt Bessy's grief had had a wholesome tonic in this terror for Mimi. For all the city, and through the press all the great world, knew now that popular and pretty Miss Warren had been married in the sick-room only a few days ago, and had gone up to the mountain cabin for various important matters, and had been trapped there, with her friend Mrs. Allen Lombard, and was lost!

And to-morrow all the world would know that the two Winships with a hundred other fire-fighters had had news of the two women, news given sparsely by a half-demented Pole, who had gotten his own women safe through fire and storm, and that the District Attorney and his brother had torn like maniacs through the ruined woods, straight to the lakeside where the exhausted women were.

"And I told them—told three of the reporters," Mimi said, "that it was you, Lucretia—all *you!* I told them that I broke down, and that you made me go on, found water for us, dragged me—miles, Steve! down that horrible hill, to the lake, and kept bathing my face all night!"

"And the Pole told us that you wouldn't leave her, Lucretia," Stephen said, his gray eyes smiling, though his face was wet with tears, "that you went back!"

Lucretia tried to smile, too, but her lips—blackened and split and bleeding—trembled, and as she shut her

eyes the tears started from under the brown lashes, and they saw her put up her cut and swollen hand, with its criss-crossed bandages, and press it against them.

"You girls will be famous the rest of your lives!" Ma Gunther predicted, wiping her glasses. "It's going to be the making of me, reporters and dear knows what all, running round the place! We had our own scare, Mis' Lombard, and most of my folks got out! Fire came right down to the top of Dick's place, and I had my silver and Ma's bedspreads packed, I c'n tell you!"

Lucretia blinked through tears.

"To—to-morrow I'll beat you at Halma!" she said.

But there was a look in her face that Stephen did not like, and late that night he spoke of it to one of the several doctors who had been only too anxious to serve the refugees. This was Mimi's own physician, Doctor Sayre, who loved all the family as if it had been his own.

"Doctor, did you think there was anything odd in the expression of those girls' eyes?"

"Fright—strain—yes, that's natural, Steve. I gave Mimi a heart stimulant; the pulse was not very strong."

"Mrs. Lombard didn't need one?"

"Oh, no. Of the two, she has stood it far better than Mimi has!"

"Better! Why, Mimi was up!"

"Yes, but there was shock. Severe shock. I let her go into Mrs. Lombard's room because it was better than having her alone! I don't——" The concern in Stephen's face interrupted the doctor. "I don't anticipate anything serious, Steve," he said. "But

of course the mother, and the father, too, had that same heart weakness. As I say, I've given her a sedative—a nurse is with her. But all her life, Stephen, I've watched her against strain. Never let her skate too much; a hundred times I've had your aunt stop her dancing!"

"Mimi!" Stephen said, aghast.

"My boy, I am sorry to frighten you. I know what she means to you—your wife. But you must help me in the same work—no strain, Steve. She's never had it—she's never had a serious illness, bless her heart! She never need have. But this has been a terrible experience for her!"

The doctor brushed the ashes from his cigar; drew in a great cool breath of the country night.

"You may go to Washington, Steve—keep her quiet. She'll grieve for her uncle—that's natural. There's a splendid constitution there, but no particular reserve!"

Profoundly uneasy, Stephen slipped upstairs, to the dimly lighted upper hall. The nurse, filled with a satisfying sense of the romance of all this, tiptoed to the door, whispered reassuringly.

"Miss Warren—but I mean Mrs. Winship, of course!—is *nicely* asleep. She had the soup, and went right off. And that's the best thing in the world for her!"

He went on, to Lucretia's door. It was late night, she had been asleep, and she was awake again. The glory of her hair alone was unchanged, to him the wrapped, disfigured face and puffed hands were full of exquisite appeal. The nurse, with the inevitable murmur regarding milk, slipped out; they were alone.

"I sleep, but I keep hearing that frightful crackling!" Lucretia murmured. He touched her hand lightly, over the white dressings. He could not speak.

"Steve, it's so good to be alive again, and life is so sweet—just life!" she added. "Just railway trains and spring and children—people to love and serve! I shall never want anything but—just breath—again. It was all burned out of me, that horrible night, when I was so wet, and so cold, and yet burning up! Now I can just lie here resting, Steve—it seems to me I will never be rested enough!—and be happy knowing that you are happy, and that—I helped!"

Stephen had knelt down beside the bed, and on the fingers his own held so gently she felt the quick hot touch of tears. The amber eyes, filled with the little golden glints and sparkles of light, were smiling at him from under the white coif, a filmy spray of gold-brown hair had escaped from the narrow bands.

"It's better this way," she said, "much, much better so! And for me it's enough, Steve, to love you as I do—and to have that, always, the knowledge that we found each other, just—just as George and Grace did!"

The wonderful, bell-like tones died away into silence; Stephen still looked down, his fine face grave, his mouth firm.

"Don't, dear!" he said, finally, giving her his kind, keen smile. And looking at him, her eyes misted with tears; Lucretia wondered what made this particular, serious, tender man so infinitely lovable, made his silences so eloquent, and his least word so poignant and so touching. He looked tired to-night, and with good reason; she longed to put her arms about his

neck, and have the smoothly brushed crest of hair rest against her cheek.

But she might never do that again. Never again. Another woman would hear the pleasant voice, and catch the kindly, quizzical smile, another woman would have the right to scold him, when this familiar, dear gray suit grew just a little shabbier, and drive him to his tailor.

"You're not in pain, dear?"

"No. Just tired! Did I make a frightful fuss on the drive home?"

"Moaned now and then. Fred was holding Mimi, you know,—and I had you. It just happened so!"

"I knew—that I was in your arms!" she said, dreamily. And after a long silence she added, wistfully, "Steve—what is it like, when it all goes right? If—if there was nothing for us to do now but—but love each other!"

He looked down at the disfigured hand, she saw the muscles of his throat move.

"Ah, don't!" he said.

There was no other word between them until the nurse came in with the milk; Lucretia drank it docilely, so rapidly that the warm liquid filmed the clear glass. Then Stephen smiled at her, and went away, envying the nurse, as he went, the privilege of those murmured words, the privilege of that golden-brown, weary smile.

He stopped at Mimi's door for a satisfactory report. Still sleeping. But Doctor Sayre did not go to bed, and Stephen kept him company on the dark porch. The moon rose late, the two men smoked and chatted quietly. They talked of the fire, the panic-stricken

army of fighters, the straggling refugees. And again and again they reviewed the hideous search for their own two fire-trapped women, the fears, the almost equally terrible hope that sprang up with the first words of the escaping Pole.

"A wonderful woman, Mrs. Lombard. There is no question that she saved them both! She deserves a great deal of praise," the doctor said. Stephen did not speak. "Beautiful, too!" the doctor added.

Silence. It was after midnight; there was not a sound on the place except their own murmuring voices.

Suddenly Stephen moved, listened—the hallway light showing his perturbed face as he turned. A door had slammed upstairs. Footsteps were running lightly down.

"Hel—loo!" the doctor said, instantly alert.

It was Mimi's nurse, breathless and frightened, who came to them.

"What is it?" the doctor asked quickly.

"Mrs. Winship, Doctor! You said to give her the stimulant at half-past twelve!"

"She's still sleeping?"

"Yes, Doctor, like a child, she hasn't stirred. But—but I can't seem to rouse her. I wish—will you come up?"

They were all three flying upstairs even as she spoke; there was that in her voice that could not be mistaken.

CHAPTER XXXI

She had gone quietly in her sleep, as her mother had died before her, twenty years ago. There was a smile on the gipsy face they all loved, there was utter peace and rest in every line of the relaxed young figure. The fingers of one hand still touched the cheek she had turned in to the pillow; and Stephen's throat constricted bitterly when the nurse whispered to him that his wife had said drowsily only an hour or two ago, that she was "so comfy!"

He had heard her use the phrase a hundred times. He stood looking down at her, his arms folded over the deep ache in his heart, and his memory busy with all the dear, confiding Mimis who had danced and chattered their way through his life. How she had lived, this silent smiling girl, whose brown hand still wore the new wedding-ring, under his mother's diamond! Happy, protected, never knowing what sorrow or shadow was in all the adored twenty-two years, until this complication of love and doubt had entered.

This afternoon, only this afternoon, when she had seemed so well and so bright, she had kept him at her bedside for a long talk. Lucretia was lying semi-conscious in her own room, then, murmuring and moaning. But Mimi had been so instantly revived, so sure of recovery!

And there in the plain country bedroom she had told

him everything: of her talk with Lucretia at the cabin, of her new comprehension and understanding, of her promise for the new life.

And being Mimi, used all her life to winning whatever she wanted, she had clasped her fingers in his, at the end, and smiled at him half-pleadingly and half-saucily.

"Steve, how can I blame you for loving her?" she had asked. "She *is* adorable. And some day she'll come back and be our friend, and you'll see how generous I can be! We both understand you—that's what makes it so much—easier for me. We both love you because you're such a darling, blundering, oblivious sort of person, wrapped up in work, and letting—letting us manage you, Steve! And some day, when—well, I know when!" Mimi had smiled mysteriously. "You are going to love me better than any one else in the world!"

"You are very cunning, it is not hard to love you!" he had answered. This would be her attitude, this his response, forever and forever. What she would not see, and would not believe, need never hurt her. And perhaps—there was always the impossible hypothesis to consider in his lawyer's mind—perhaps she was right!

And now she was gone; and they had all slipped out of the room, to leave him alone "with his grief."

When he came out an hour later, he was white-faced, tired, composed. He must drive to Sanbridge at once, where Fred was, with Mrs. Curran, and break this terrible news to his aunt. The doctor went with him, discoursing upon the long way gravely but controlledly

of heart attack following shock or strain. Only once was Lucretia's name mentioned.

"There is a seasoned woman; she has faced emergencies before," the doctor said. "She is to have her sleep out—she has a magnificent constitution. Mrs. Gunther has promised me to tell her, as best she can in the morning——"

Stephen made no comment. In the last few days his world had fallen about his ears.

But after the earthquake and fire, creeping up into his emptied heart, came the word. It came months afterward; when the Curran house was long sold, when a pallid, quiet little black-veiled Aunt Bessy, who lived with Mrs. Porter, had taken the place of the rotund and complacent Mrs. Curran, and when the February snows were deep upon the two new graves. Fred, basking in Brazilian heat, had had time to send many letters, and sometimes in them was transmitted a word of Lucretia, in Paris. She was well, she was busy, her translation of the old doctor's poems had been accepted, —that was all that Stephen's heart had to feed upon for many long months.

And then came the word. It came on a quiet wintry morning, with a wind whirling dry snow over the packed drifts, and a gray sky promising more snow. In the adjoining office typewriters were clicking, radiators hummed and lisped in every silence. District Attorney Winship, now Senator-elect, was extremely busy when the mail came in—the few letters marked "personal."

He took them up, his heart hammered. The whole world turned round him dizzily as he took the familiar

limp square envelope in his hand. Postmarked "Sanbridge." She was here!

"*Steve, dear, I arrived at the rectory last night. Hannah had everything in perfect order. Could you come to me at four o'clock for a cup of tea?*"

He reached for his telephone, cleared his throat, laughed gruffly in the winter warmth of the office. But the receiver was shaking like an aspen in his hand.

THE END